

interzone

MAY/JUNE 2003

NUMBER 189

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'The Rule of Terror'

Dominic Green

plus stories by

Tony Ballantyne

Jay Caselberg

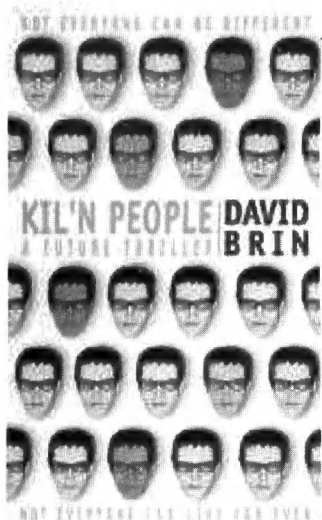
Darrell Schweitzer

John Shirley

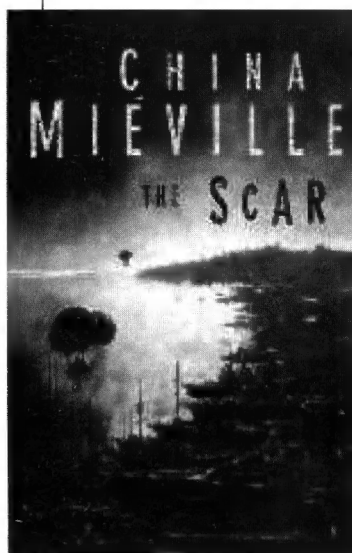
Vaughan Stanger



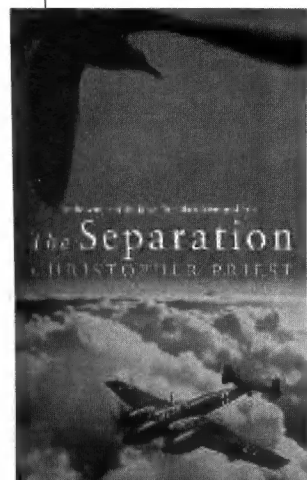
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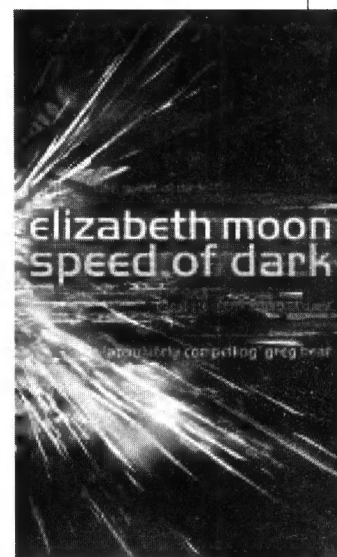
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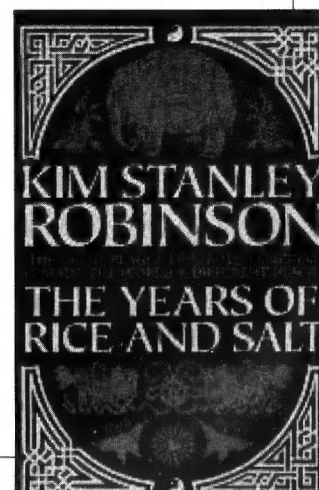


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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

MAY 2003

Number 189

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A Small Blooper

Dear Editors:

I'm pleased that the Neil-squared Team chose to cite my story in their review of Dozois's *Year's Best Science Fiction: Nineteenth Annual Collection* (Interzone 185, p59), but they mangled the title a little: it's not "Neutrino Dog" but rather "Neutrino Drag." This story will be the title piece, in fact, in my new collection from Four Walls Eight Windows in Fall 2003. While, as Gene Wolfe did with *Castle of the Otter*, I might someday use the mistake as inspiration to write a story titled "Neutrino Dog" – I can see immense possibilities already! – no such story yet exists!

Paul Di Filippo

Providence, Rhode Island

"The Smart Minefield"

Dear Editors:

I am a longtime reader of *Interzone* (about ten years, I worked out recently), and my wife recently gave in to the inevitable and bought me a lifetime subscription as a birthday present, so I hope to look forward to many more years enjoying the magazine. I love the mix of fiction, interviews and reviews and often buy books based on your recommendations.

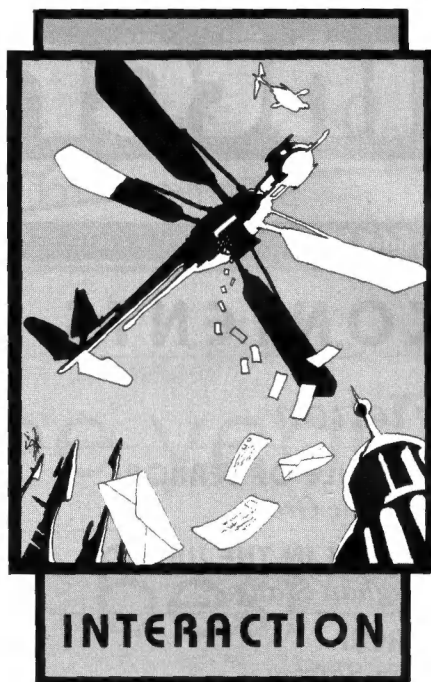
One of the stories I particularly enjoyed recently was "The Smart Minefield" by Chris Butler (IZ 185) – I thought it was a great concept and a neatly-put-together "puzzle" story. Imagine my delight today when I came across an article at TheRegister.co.uk, describing some recent DARPA developments. The article points to a DARPA web site at www.darpa.mil/ato/programs/SHM/index.html which gives the full details of their programme. To summarize:

"The Self-Healing Minefield system is designed to achieve an increased resistance to dismounted and mounted breaching by adding a novel dimension to the minefield. Instead of a static complex obstacle, the Self-Healing Minefield is an intelligent, dynamic obstacle that responds to an enemy breaching attempt by physically reorganizing. The Self-Healing Minefield consists of surface-scattered antitank mines that can detect an enemy attack of the minefield and respond autonomously, by having a fraction of the mines move to heal the breach."

So, my question is, did Chris come up with this idea independently or did he know about the DARPA programme? Either way, it was still a great story!

Paul Merriman

Blackheath, London



Chris Butler replies: Thanks for your kind words about "The Smart Minefield." Yes, I was aware of the DARPA developments. I first heard of the idea for an intelligent minefield from a report in *New Scientist* (about September 2000). The idea of land-mines that hop around and communicate with each other seemed both terrifying and absurd at the same time. I started wondering how effective such a minefield might be – whether it would work and whether it could be outwitted. It seemed perfect for a "puzzle" story. I am in favour of basing sf stories on emerging technologies. I don't particularly trawl through science magazines looking for ideas, but if I happen to be inspired by a factual article then that's all well and good.

I had some concerns about setting the story in the far future, when this minefield technology is literally just around the corner. My main reason for doing so was that the analogy I was trying to draw, between the men and the mines, was much easier to achieve if I went further into the future. It's just a better story that way, and I'm a fiction writer rather than a science reporter.

Ironically, the US has been pushed into developing these smarter anti-tank minefields as a result of international pressure to ban anti-personnel mines (the Ottawa Convention). No doubt we're creating another problem for ourselves further down the line. My fervent hope is that the smart minefield concept proves to be unworkable for some technical reason. But given the millions of dollars being invested in it, I fear they will find a way to make it work.

Gillespie on Novellas

Dear Editors:

I read with some puzzlement Bruce Gillespie's article on the resurgence of the sf novella (IZ 187) in which he seemed completely unaware that the novellas he was discussing were first published as standalone volumes by PS Publishing. I suppose that it is just possible that Bruce, isolated in the Antipodes as he is, actually might be unaware of the true publishing history, but surely this is a case where you, as editor of the magazine, should have stepped in and pointed out his error?

Were this simply a review of the Gollancz anthologies, this omission would not have been too important, but in an article whose entire theme is the conditions under which novellas can be published, it is a fatal flaw and is akin to all those myriad mainstream pieces that praise a mainstream author's venture into "speculative fantasy" while being completely unaware of the rest of the genre.

Phil Stephensen-Payne
Leeds

Editor: (I should begin by pointing out that despite his initials, and despite the fact he lives in Yorkshire, where the novellas also originate, Phil Stephensen-Payne has nothing to do with PS Publishing – that small outfit is run by Peter Crowther, from Harrogate.) Phil, thanks for your comments on Bruce Gillespie's article. I doubt Bruce has seen the original novellas – because I doubt most people have, especially those who live in Australia. It was my assumption that he was reviewing the Gollancz volumes because they are the most publicly available, and most likely to find their way into libraries. In any case, full details of all the PS Publishing novellas to date have been given in *Interzone's* "Books Received," and many of them have been reviewed individually prior to Bruce's overview article.

Favourite Stories of 2002

Dear Editors:

I forward to you my list of favourite *Interzone* stories from 2002:

1. "The Dark" by Richard Calder. If for nothing else for this: "The chaos in which he left his study swam into focus, books and manuscripts, manuscripts and books – the accumulated nonsense of a lifetime."
2. "Geese in the Mist" by Zoran Živkovic. ZZ's stories are best read the way you publish them, one at a time.
3. "The Blue Portal" by Eric Brown.

4. "Tread Softly" by Brian Stableford. The kind of story I used to read *F&SF* for.
5. "The Ghost in the Valley" by Alexander Glass. Ditto.
6. "The Eight Moon Dollar" by Daniel Kaysen. You will get no objection from me to any more Plan Man stories.
7. "Teaching the War Robot to Dance" by Tony Ballantyne.
8. "Fame" by Timons Esaias.
9. "An Exhalation of Butterflies" by Nigel Atkinson. This and Andy Robertson's story made me track down a copy of Hodgson's *The Night Land*, but I still haven't managed to finish reading it.
10. "The Hamlet A.I. Murders" by Molly Brown. I'm a fan of MB. I have a copy of *Virus*. This was good, but no cigar.
11. "Posterity" by Christopher Evans. As with many of the longer stories, I liked the idea, but felt slightly disappointed with the pay-off.

Non-fiction: "Roddenberry's Children" by Evelyn Lewes was surprisingly good and vindicated your decision to continue publishing this column despite much (generally justified) criticism. A good range of interviews – the one with Christopher Priest was probably the best. Best cover: Dominic Harman's for issue 177.

Steve Tollyfield

stephen.tollyfield@talk21.com

Dear Editors:

I've only been reading *Interzone* since issue 179, but I thought I'd chip in to your popularity poll.

Likes:

- 179: Dominic Green's "News From Hilaria" (fun, light satire)
- 180: Eric Brown's "The Blue Portal, Part 1" (good evocation of a Victorian sf story; the second part was a bit of a letdown, though)
- 181: Geoffrey Landis's "Old Tingo's Penis" (if only for the out-there-ness of the idea)
- 182: Zoran Zivkovic's "Geese in the Mist" (excellent writing)
- 183: Timons Esaias's "Fame" (good idea, well executed)
- 184: Julian West's "Vita Brevis Ars Longa" (stand-out story; not surprised it won prizes)

Dislikes:

- 181: Richard Calder's "The Dark" (I don't particularly care for this brand of fantasy)
- 182: May Bohnhoff's "Cruel and Unusual Punishment" (way too long)
- 183: Peter Garratt's "Eaters of the Heart" (too long, and the satire was as subtle as an ICBM)

The non-fiction features are consistently good, in particular, Nick Lowe's "Mutant Popcorn" and Dave Langford's "Ansible Link."

Gary Meehan

Leeds

Dear Editors:

Tops of the year 2002 were...

- "Lucid" by Alexander Glass, issue 175
- "Singleton" by Greg Egan, issue 176
- "If Lions Could Speak" by Paul Park, issue 176
- "Entities" by Norman Spinrad, issue 181

That peak of perfection was neared by:

- "An Exhalation of Butterflies" by Nigel Atkinson, 179
- "Osmund Considers" by Timons Esaias, 179
- "Cruel and Unusual Punishment" by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff, 182
- "Elysian Dreams" by Alexander Glass, 176

Stories I liked but perhaps failed to love:

- "The Dreaming Mould" by Stephen Baxter, 179
- "Five British Dinosaurs" by Michael Swanwick, 177
- "Welcome to the Green Planet" by Keith Brooke, 180
- "Time Spent in Reconnaissance" by Mat Coward, 181
- "Posterity" by Christopher Evans, 182
- "A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens" by Claude Lalumière, 182
- "The Comeback Season" by Daniel Kaysen, 184
- "Vita Brevis Ars Longa" by Julian West, 184
- "Frog Level" by Bud Webster, 184

Hmmm, 17 stories, eight of them pretty well satisfying my sf thirst, nine more tickling it... not too bad, although for some reason I have a general sense that recent issues have been tame/a bit disappointing... nothing seems to have really taken me for a ride like the best sf which slaps a youthful flush into your face with its audacious tale fins too muscular for

Important Announcement

Readers will have noticed that this issue of *Interzone* is dated "May-June 2003." As on previous occasions when we have double-dated an issue, this does not mean that the magazine has moved to a bimonthly schedule, and nor does it mean that we have skipped an issue. The issue numbering remains continuous, and the magazine remains monthly, so no one loses out. (All subscriptions are per six or twelve issues and take no account of cover dates.) It's just that we've found it necessary, because of continued slippage in our schedule, to re-date the magazine so that it covers two months for this issue. We apologize for this, and hope that it causes no undue confusion. The next *Interzone*, number 190, will be the July 2003 issue.

your grasping mind to restrain! But then, am I asking too much?

Dare I say that Charles Stross is in just such audacious Besterish form with his series of stories about the digitally advanced family Manx appearing in *Asimov's SF Mag*, if you will allow a whisper of the competition's name... all partners in the advance of quality sf, though, right!? Also reminded me of the densely nanotechnological future envisioned and expressed by John Clute in his fantastic flush-inducing novel *Appleseed* from last year... one of the rare novels I shall read and savour again. Also Linda Nagata's wonderful *Vast* comes to mind... how about a profile of her, and an interview? She's been shamefully neglected on this side of the Pond, but she's as audacious as Greg Egan, on the evidence of what little has been offered us.

Thanks for the Barrington Bayley interview. He was one of my favourite *New Worlds* authors. I'd like to see more articles like those of Gary Westfahl, or the authors whose excellent articles used to appear in *SF Eye*, which has unfortunately failed to appear for a number of years now. And I'd like to see less space wasted by Evelyn Lewes... interpret that how you will. Also, more reviews of hard-core sf available readily in this country: I didn't see *Doctor Who* as a kid, and its charm passes me by... it's not what I think of when I mutter "now *that's* sf" to myself. Nor do I often read a review of a fantasy which informs or delights me, either, which is a shame. How I miss John Clute's reviews! The drawings by SMS are lovely, the classiest thing about the 'zine.

Syd Foster

Swansea

Dear Editors:

In alphabetical order by author's name, the stories I most enjoyed in your magazine over 2002 were:

- Beckett, Chris: "The Turing Test" (a nice satirical fable).
- Brown, Molly: "The Hamlet A.I. Murders" (I love the idea of Hamlet in Silicon Valley; a very clever update, and it made me laugh).
- Evans, Christopher: "Posterity" (turned out differently than I thought it would; nice subversion of my expectations).
- Stableford, Brian: "Tread Softly" (a perfectly crafted tale from a master of his craft; Stableford is one of my favourite writers).
- Webb, Don: "The Yellow Flower" (interesting take on the nature of reality).
- Williamson, Neil: "The Happy Gang" (evoked the horror of life in the trenches).

Overall, I always enjoy the magazine. (Not a subscriber, but a regular reader nonetheless.)

Monica Miller

monica_seven45@hotmail.com

THE RULE OF

T E R R O R

JUST COME BACK DOWN, LAWRENCE. COME BACK AND WE'LL TALK."

The voice of the police negotiator was almost drowned by the traffic. Whatever he was speaking into seemed to have been left over from the Army Strikes of 2012. He'd have been better off just raising his voice. His voice, amplified, sounded tired. He'd probably been doing this a lot lately.

The voice of the jumper, on the other hand, cut through the background whine of motors loud and clear.

"Nothing's going to change."

"SOMEONE'S PUT THAT INTO YOUR HEAD, LAWRENCE. DON'T LISTEN TO THEM. JUST... COULD YOU PLEASE CLEAR THE PAVEMENT. CLEAR THE PAVEMENT, PLEASE. PARAMEDICS –"

Jean-Baptiste kept the camera rolling way past the point of good taste. "Quite a good one, that. Somehow when they go down headfirst they always seem to make that angel pattern on the pavement."

"You're a wanker sometimes, J-B," said Luc in English.

"I can get 2,000 Euro per frame for my wankage off Reuters Snuff Video. Wanky wank wank, that's what I say."

"Was he an End-It-Nower?"

J-B shrugged. "Seems certain. *C'est leur slogan, ça – Rien ne va se changer.* That'll be one thousand one hundred and two this month."

"Qu'est-ce qu'en pense le gouvernement?"

"The government couldn't care less. Jumpers don't vote." J-B extruded a modem aerial to transmit his footage to several different international non-squeamish news agencies. "I tell you, this entire nation's committing suicide."

Luc turned and faced the northbound

traffic, a tide of doleful-faced commuters motoring across the Solent in plastic electric bubbles, each bubble plastered with a poker hand of licences, tax stickers, and civil congestion-charge receipts. As he watched, a gigantic SUVTOL powered down from holding pattern in the sky and inserted itself into a hairline crack between two plastic-electrics. The little cars honked and hooted, but made room anyway; the big jump-jeep could have melted their canopies with its exhaust alone.

"That guy must piss fuel," commented Luc.

"Probably got an Essential Usage Allowance," said J-B. "Most people in management wangle one these days. It's the same in Brussels and Paris. You'd be surprised how many doctors, paramedics and firemen have popped up in society recently."

"Are we saving any fuel at *all*?" moaned Luc. The SUVTOL had a sticker on its belly strakes saying KEEP NEWPORT BEAUTIFUL.

"Probably not," said J-B. He pointed to a second sticker on the passenger-side wind-screen saying THE BUSINESS EXCELLENCE PARTNERSHIP BUILDING PORTSMOUTH (AUTHORIZED PARKING). "He's only going ten kilometres at the most."

"Maybe all these electric cars cancel it out, at least."

J-B shook his head. "Where'd you think the electricity comes from? Organic happy tree-loving crystal power? That recharging station *there* where those guys are zapping up is fed by those power lines over *there*. And those power lines go all the way north to a great big rig which injects oxygen into a coal seam and uses the heat from the ensuing explosion to (a) drive a fucking great turbine and (b) pump carbon monoxide and coal dust all over the Pennines. And the European Commission wonders why everyone in Britain's still drifting south. Battery-powered cars are the biggest best con the petrochemical industry ever pulled

Dominic
Green

on us. Welcome to the Dark Land of Mordor.”

At that moment, a voice spoke in Luc's ear.

“Excuse me, sir; I think you dropped this.”

He felt a hand press something into his own. He examined it. It was a hundred-Euro note. On one side of it was writing saying: “The New Hundred-Euro Note, Sponsored by the Golden Arches of the new McDonald's in Gaza City, Peace Across the World.” On the other side, by strange coincidence, was the bridge Luc was standing on. He looked for himself, but was nowhere to be seen.

Luc looked up at the man. The man was wearing, among other things, a red-and-white scarf and a pair of bicycle clips.

“Erm, thank you,” he said.

The man raised his lexan cycling helmet, mounted a plastic-electric All Terrain Segway, and burned off down the pavement at a leisurely amble.

“He wants you to follow him,” said J-B, out of the corner of his mouth.

“What?” said Luc.

“He's a lunatic. He believes the British government, FBI and Bavarian Illuminati are listening to his and everyone else's every word via hidden microphones and observe every step we all take outside our homes on CCTV. He believes that if he speaks certain coded words, such as ‘Are you a journalist,’ ‘I have a story for you,’ or ‘Do not speak, Homeland Security are watching my every move,’ he will alert a computer program which trawls through every single word recorded on every street corner in Britain to his presence, and he will come to the attention of the authorities.” J-B shrugged. “Who knows, he may be correct.”

“How do you know he wants me to follow him?” said Luc.

“‘Excuse Me, Sir, I Think You Dropped This’ is one of the things they say. It's a sort of coded message meaning ‘Please Follow Me, I Have a Message For You.’ As such, it's probably already stored on some MI5 computer somewhere as a trigger phrase, but what are you going to do?”

Luc looked at the man. He looked up at the bridge supports around him.

“Yes, there is a microphone,” said J-B. “It's fixed to that police CCTV camera over there, which is designed to reassure the public of a soothing police presence.”

“What police camera?”

“It's hidden in that litter bin. You might have noticed you can't actually put litter in the bin. British towns *never* allow you to put litter in bins. You might be al-Qaeda, the All New Real IRA, the PKK, or the Free Jersey Liberation Army. It might be *exploding* litter.” He eyed the litter bin warily. “They say some of the more intelligent bins lift up on little castors and follow you about.”

Luc turned warily, scanning the horizon for watching litter bins. He saw none. But out of the crowd of onlookers who were expressing a healthy interest in what a human being looked like after it had smacked into a bridge support at 300 kilometres per hour, he felt a pair of eyes burn into his own. The eyes belonged to a short, grey-haired man dressed entirely in black, his gaze locked on Luc's like a cobra's on a rodent. Unnerved, Luc

looked away, and when he looked back, the crowd had moved, and the man had gone.

The Segwayman had taken the first exit lane, motored to a halt in a space fastidiously marked ELECTRIC VEHICLES ONLY, left his vehicle and entered a pub. The pub was made out of plastic sheeting and steel girders painted black and white. This would have made it resemble the Half Timber of Old England had there not been a giant flashing Beefeater outside it holding up a sign saying YE HALFE TIMBERE OF OLDE ENGLANDE.

Inside, a World Football Federation match was on the flatscreen. The Manchester United skipper was addressing the half-time crowd and informing them that, no matter how many balls went into the back of the Liverpool or Man United net, he, Vinnie Hogan, would personally break the Liverpool captain and make him bleed. The crowds both on and off the screen went wild. Luc pushed his way through the off-screen crowd to the bar, where his accomplice was sitting nursing a pint of the diabetic urine the British called lager.

“SORRY ABOUT THAT,” yelled the man. “THEY'VE GOT A WHITE NOISE SYSTEM IN HERE, YOU SEE.” He flicked a switch on the bar top, and the hubbub of the bar diminished. “Ahhh, that's better. The CCTV mike in here's installed over there – our voices have to get past three other white noise bubbles before they get to it. It probably can't hear us.” He glanced in the direction of the microphone warily. He introduced an OAP sitting at the bar wearing an I TOLD YOU NOT TO ATTACK IRAQ T-shirt and a second red-and-white scarf. Luc wondered whether the scarf was some sort of revolutionary uniform. “This is my dad.”

“Ponces,” said the old man, glancing at the flatscreen with venom. “All bloody theatre it is today. They use radio-controlled magnetized balls. You can see them bloody change course in bloody mid-air. It were nowt short of a bloody miracle to see a man poke a ball into the net from 30 yards when I was a kid.”

“Dad had a trial once for Sheffield United,” explained the segwayman.

“Balls,” said the old man. “*Magnetic* balls,” he added darkly.

“You, er, wanted to talk to me,” said Luc. “Er, I think.”

The segwayman passed over a pub grub menu to Luc. “The *burgers* should be *revolting*,” he said. “But they're not. You'll want some *sauce*,” he said. Then he winked, raised his protective headgear, snapped it back to his head, and walked away. The old man accompanied him.

Luc turned the menu over in his hand. There was something inside it. Carefully, he slid it out. It was a square piece of plastic.

As he left the pub, the referee was announcing to a packed stadium crowd that, to add some real spice to the match, Manchester United would be playing Liverpool across a pitch littered with flat-pack self-assembly furniture.

“It looks like a Floppy,” said J-B's voice as Luc held the plastic device in front of the mobile. “They used to use

them to store data. He probably gave it to you because he knew no one would recognize what it was.”

“Why’s it called a Floppy?” said Luc. “It’s rigid.”

“It’s short for Floppy Disk,” said J-B defensively.

“It’s square,” said Luc.

“Well, it could have data on it. Actually, it may even be a Zip Disk. You can tell that because it has ‘Zip’ written on it. You might actually be able to find someone who could read it for you. There are people who collect stuff like this. Museum curators, mostly.”

Luc, walking past a roadside market, noticed a glass-sided GM Porium parked up next to a temporary sign saying ANTIQUE’S AND CURIO’S. Beside the many other items on the shelves inside the vehicle – carpet beaters, hostess trolleys, turn-of-the-century atropine auto-injectors – he saw something that caught his attention and wrestled it to a standstill.

“Can’t talk now, J-B. I have located a place to put my plastic.”

Plastic in hand, he rushed up to the owner and made a purchase.

It was Luc’s nine o’clock appointment. He was never late.

The mobocafé was parked up illegally in the centre of a square walled with latté houses. Costa Coffee, Starbucks and Caffè Ndrangheta vied for logo space. Private security guards stood at the entrances.

At the mobocaff, those Britons who couldn’t spare 70 euro for a cup of coffee lined up for the brown pisswater Britons had drunk for centuries and liked. Batul was sitting warming her fingerless gloves around a plastic cup, shivering in the cold.

“You want a hot drink somewhere more expensive?” said Luc.

Batul shook her head. “At least I know this guy’s tea’s made of good honest blackthorn leaves.” She nodded in the direction of Caffè Ndrangheta. “*Their* coffee over *there* is made by ex-heroin warlords who get paid off to grow it instead of opium.”

Luc nodded and placed the mobile phone on the table, setting it to RECORD. “Do you ever talk about *nice* things?”

“I have been living in this bastard country for 30 years,” said Batul. “There are *no* nice things. Besides, I haven’t time to wait in a ten-minute queue while some spotty school-leaver works out how to operate the espresso machine. I only have 30 minutes on my lunch break.”

Luc was amazed. “You’re *working*?”

“Don’t look so surprised. We refugees are *capable* of working, you know. We’re *all* bastard working. Seventy per bastard cent of us. Didn’t you *know* that? You’re supposed to be a *journalist*.”

The café owner leaned over Luc’s shoulder, and tapped him on it, informing him that, firstly, oi, and secondly, them chairs didn’t pay for themselves.

Luc looked round. Half the bum-freezing aluminium seats were empty. Grudgingly, he extruded 15 euro for a cup of brown urine. While the barista wasn’t looking Batul emptied a full seven sachets of sugar into her own pisswater, then sat back stirring it with a plastic spoon.

Luc looked at the spoon, and at his own plastic cup. Both of them were covered in blue writing saying MADE FROM 100% RECYCLED PLASTIC. He pulled out the recylometer from his pocket.

“What’re you doing?”

“Eight out of every ten plastic recycler units in Britain are made by the same company in Osaka. When the recycler melts and remoulds the plastic, it includes a low-level radioactive signature. Fake-recycled products don’t have the signature.” He ran the recylometer over both sides of the spoon.

“Ha, so they’re radioactive and will harm my chances of having children. Very green.”

“It’s only *very low-level*... as I thought. Fake.”

“Thank god for that. Wouldn’t want to be anywhere near radiation, me.” She sniggered and slurped her pisswater ostentatiously.

“I’ve made the decision,” she said.

“Already?”

“Actually, I made it several weeks ago. I’ve just been in preparation since, mental and physical. I didn’t want to tell you unless you told the Suicide Squad. Suicide’s still a crime, you know.”

Luc tried to drink his coffee, found it undrinkable and instead warmed his hands with it. It was lukewarm. “That is a terrible waste. You’re young. You have a child. You speak four languages. You have a medical degree. And, to be frank, a mysterious oriental beauty.” He fluttered his eyelashes at her hopefully. “Will you be my wife?”

She cackled. “And with that medical degree and all those languages, I work in a factory putting the heads on novelty plastic garden hedgehogs.” She shuddered. “They wear wellington boots and have the *cutest* little plastic rosy cheeks. The man working next to me used to be a merchant banker in the City.”

Luc grinned. “So there *is* some justice in the world.”

Batul found this amusing, and laughed so hard that she coughed, violently, into a handkerchief. Luc was worried to note blood showing through the fabric. “No child of mine is going to, er, grow up.”

“That’s not suicide,” said Luc firmly. “That’s murder. There’s blood in your handkerchief.”

She nodded. “We work with radio-isotopes. Our hedgehogs have a radioactive power source.”

“Power source?” Luc was troubled. “How can a hedgehog need a power source?”

“At the touch of a button,” said Batul, “the hedgehog bathes your lawn with laser disco light-effects. The product sits astride a dear little plastic Harley Davidson, and is known as MC Hog.”

“Are you saying you don’t have proper protective clothing? Are these isotopes legal?”

Batul scoffed. “After the attack on London, all any terrorist needs to get hold of Pu-239 is a hole in the perimeter fences, an NBC suit, and a dustpan and brush. Waste not, want not. How’d you think your fancy Eternity-Battery mobile phone gets its power?”

Luc looked down at his phone in unconcealed fright.

“The big companies bribe the MoD to let their trucks

through the wire into the Westminster crater almost every night. You can tell them in the car parks – ancient Scammells, no electronic ignition, no engine management systems, nothing that might have a chip in it that radiation could burn out. Oh, and they're always wet. They get hosed down with great regularity."

Luc absorbed this. "So... that's why you're thinking of Ending It Now. You think you're probably going to die anyway."

"We are all going to die, Luc. Some of us just aren't going to eat 30 more years of shit before we do."

"But what does suicide accomplish?"

She looked Luc in the eye. "M. Giraud, we are not trying to *accomplish* anything. We are not political activists. We are suicides. There is no hidden agenda. There is only death."

"Lung cancer can be treated, you know."

"Yes, and that's the thing, isn't it? Do you know how many lung cancer sufferers there are wandering coughing round Britain at the moment? But if we try to get to see a doctor, we get told, sorry, this surgery's not accepting new patients right now. And if I wander into Casualty and bleed all over the seats, they make me wait four hours, then give me a few painkillers for my trouble. Their system's in just as much collapse as mine." She stared into the bottom of her teacup. It had been instant tea. There was no future to read. "Maybe I should try crossing the Channel and making it into Switzerland. That's just about the only country that hasn't pissed anybody off enough to stop a nuke. I hear they're taking refugees from war zones now."

Luc nodded. "They've had to since they joined the EU." "Switzerland is in the EU? When did that happen?"

"Last year when the EU threatened to cut off all their oil, gas, power and water till they joined."

She grinned like a vampire. There was blood on her teeth.

"How are you going to do it?" said Luc.

She hung her head, coyly, an action entirely unlike her. "We're trying something a little bit new. Do you know anything about Mahayana and Hinayana?"

"I've heard of them. They're varieties of Buddhism. Your point being?"

"Nothing." She rose to her feet, suddenly revived, inexplicably happy. "It's nice to talk to you, Luc. It's nice to talk to someone who doesn't think I'm distracting them while my pimp tries to lift their wallet just because I'm a London refugee."

As Luc watched Batul hurry from the mobocaff, he saw a young man, hardly more than a boy, standing drawing an elaborate design on one of the big expensive plate glass windows that fronted the latté houses. The boy's handiwork was intricate, and he drew with great care, tucking his tongue unconsciously into the corner of his mouth. But he was not being bothered by the security guards. He was not being bothered because his artwork, to everyone but himself, seemed to be invisible.

Having finished writing invisibly on the front of Caffè Ndrangheta, the young man expanded his oeuvre across the wall beside it, equally imperceptibly. Luc, unnerved, rose

to his feet, then stopped like a rabbit caught in headlights.

There, across the square, standing outside the Caffè Ndrangheta, paying the young man no heed, was the same black-clad old man Luc had seen earlier on the Solent Bridge, his eyes still fixed on Luc like that of a maniac. Muttering imprecations, Luc hurried across the square and selected a cab at random. The old man followed Luc's cab with his gaze all the way round the one-way system, and as the cab indicated left to leave the square, his face cracked into a smile, and he waved goodbye.

"It's a hole," said J-B out of the telephone on Luc's dresser. "A hole in the side of an antique."

"A hole *exactly*," said Luc, "the size of our Disk Zip."

"Zip disk. Big deal. Look, I really don't think there can be any information of any value on one of those things. By all accounts you can't even fit a human genome onto one of them."

"Poo to you too. Where are you now anyway?"

"EasyConcorde out of London. German regional independence demonstration. The word is they've been putting together bombs out of coils of barbed wire wrapped round an explosive core ready to throw at riot police. It should be good."

"Uh, yeah, right." Luc knelt down under the desk and fumbled with ancient connectors. "What part of Germany is it? Can you believe this thing has a 250-volt power supply?!"

"It's not *that* long since the rosbifs changed over. They had to. That and drive on the right."

"They used to drive on the *left*?"

"Didn't you know that? They even used to have their own currency. *And* a royal family. The Union changed all that as a precondition of the Rebuilding and Resettlement programme in 2025ssssss--"

J-B's face swirled into a pixellated haze on the screen.

"You're breaking up. Are you flying high enough for interference?"

"I don't think these old birdssssss fly that highssssss--"

The phone screen went white. Then, it went dead.

Luc stared at the phone a moment, then shrugged and carried on connecting the Gordian mess of cables into the bewildering array of ports in the back of the ancient computer as the old man in the van had instructed. Eventually, marvelling at the patience, savvy and taste for interminable coils of PVC of the ancients, he pressed the big button marked "ON." The shopowner had told him to wait several minutes while something called "XP" went through a process described as "booting."

Then the phone rang. Suspecting the Booting process might be violent, Luc was already waiting with frayed nerves in a position of safety behind the sofa, and knocked the mobile off the dresser top when he went to answer it.

"*Nouvelles urgentes*," purred the phone sexily. Luc confirmed the READ prompt. The screen lit up with a blurry picture of a pillar of smoke and fire. Luc suspected it to be a shed fire in somebody's back garden until a very small Super Jumbo flew in front of it. The Super Jumbo

had a Teutonic cross on both wings. At the bottom of the screen, J-B read:

MUNICH MUNICH MÜNCHEN

"Alors," he said. "C'était là où tu étais, J-B."

"...casualties are difficult to ascertain, as the city was full of an estimated 100,000 Bavarian independence demonstrators from out of town. Thirty extremist groups have so far claimed responsibility. There have already been reports of lynchings of Turks in Cologne, of Scientists in Stuttgart, and of Neo-Nazis in Dresden—"

Luc switched the telephone off.

"So," he said to himself. "We've lost another city. Another week, another city."

He looked up to the computer screen. He had been told to expect "icons." One of the icons was helpfully labelled "Mr Zippy." After several minutes' cursing in English, he mastered the "mouse" and "clicked" on the "icon." After several more minutes' cursing in French, he remembered to push the disk into the machine, and clicked again.

"Sorry to phone you at such short notice, but – well, you're the only person I know who knows enough about computers to deal with the problem, and—"

"More like I'm the only guy you know who's old enough to recognize any of this stuff," said the Professor from the mobile phone screen. He had grown a lot more grey since Luc had last seen him. "Also, I suspect you know they don't replace the computer equipment in the schools out here too often. I think we might even have some of those doodads out in the server room." He squinted at the computer flatscreen. There was a live penguin sitting on a window ledge behind him. "Is that all there was on it?"

Luc peered at the open file. "Why? Will it hold more?"

"You could put around a hundred full-length novels on one of them. Provided they were by Troyat rather than Proust."

The file only contained a few paragraphs written in English and punctuation. Luc, not a perfect student of English, bit his lip. "Is it Old English?"

"No," said the man on the phone, laughing. "That's source code. I think I even recognize the language. It's code in an operating system called KAMELOS, designed by a committee a few years back for the Demos project."

"What does it do?" said Luc, who had heard of source code only dimly.

"Long time since I did any commercial programming, but the function names are pretty descriptive... at a high level it looks like it accepts two objects, a record called 'poll' and a value called 'desired option.' If a value in 'poll' called 'option selected' isn't equal to 'desired option,' it then carries out a function called 'trash' on 'poll'..."

"Which does?"

"It may do one of several things, depending on what it finds in a value in 'poll' called 'voting method.' For example, if 'voting method' is 'hand counted,' it turns on a value in 'poll' called 'spoiled ballot paper.' If 'voting method' is 'voting booth,' it turns on a value called 'corrupt data transfer'... and so on. Uh, and if 'trash' fails to achieve the desired result, it then checks a series of values in 'poll' – 'is voter certified insane?' is one, 'is voter

a known criminal?" is another – and calls routines such as 'remove from register on grounds of insanity'—"

"So what does it do?" said Luc.

"I would have thought that was obvious. It's a means of fixing a computerized ballot. Probably a joke by some programmer on the Demos project who got bored. How did you get hold of it? Was it in the drive when you bought the machine?"

"Erm," said Luc, and then: "...Yes. Yes, it was."

Professor Lheureux's image seemed to blur and twist on the screen. The picture became grainier.

"Fascinating. Where did you buy the machine? Are you in Brussels right now? They did most of the programming work in Brussels, so I've heard. This line is bad. Can you give me your land-line number? If you don't know it, just give me your address and I'll run a search. Are you in a hotel?"

Luc, however, wasn't listening. Instead, he was looking at the full-length mirror to the left of Lheureux on the telephone screen.

In the mirror, as the Professor spoke, *the Professor's lips were not moving.*

Someone was intercepting the signal. Controlling the conversation. Someone with a great deal of rapid processing power. Someone who wanted very dearly to know exactly where Luc was calling from.

"Fin." Luc cut the connection quickly. He was about to use the phone again to run a search utility, but instead hit the power switch. "Mours." The phone died.

"Télédiverteur," he said; then, realizing he wasn't at home, "Gogglebox." The room's ancient communications and entertainment fit bled into life. "Search: Demos project, subject categories European government, referendum."

The screen lit up with a long list of official sites, hundreds of specific though unofficial articles, and a list of pieces mentioning Demos in passing that numbered in the thousands. Luc selected the official Federal site and was gratified to note that it had a link to "KAMELOS, the integrated operating system and language developed specifically for the Demos project."

"Goto KAMELOS," said Luc. The holovolume swirled as a three-dimensional fish swam through it, as if the pixels had been mud particles disturbed by its passage. *Cheap Waiting-for-Refresh automation*, thought Luc.

Then the volume displayed a solid logo, cut from fuzzily-rendered 3D graphic granite.

Luc blinked. But the logo was still there.

It was Luc's four o'clock appointment. Luc was never late.

"You know how long this room is?" said Batul. "Four point eight metres. You want to know how wide? Two point four."

Batul was sitting on a sofa which had probably been salvaged from a municipal tip. It had seen better days, better decades. Somebody's cat had disembowelled it over a long and violent acquaintance. Batul had patched up the holes with cheap material. A tortoiseshell kitten was busy trying to reopen the old wound.

The room was made of steel/concrete matrix, in stan-

dardized blocks. The short end, the one where Luc was sitting, was the windowpiece, with a single metre-by-metre pane, predictably broken. Visible plastic ducting led wires round the walls. The pipes were also plastic. There was a sink, small enough to bath an aborted fetus in, at one end. The long wall contained a doorpiece.

"I have been in 16 of these prefab blocks," said the painfully thin young man sitting on the arm of the sofa. "Everyone who used to live in inner London has been in two or three."

"Shuttled around like a bonus ball in Otto Lotto," grumbled Batul.

"Otto Lotto?"

Batul lit a cigarette. The cigarette, by EU edict, began to whistle "ACHTUNG! ATTENTION! WARNING! ICH TÖTE SIE! JE VOUS TUE! I WILL KILL YOU!" through heat-triggered mini-speakers in its filter. Batul inhaled the smoke greedily. "The EuroLot machine." She dabbed ash into an upturned beer bottle top on the chair arm.

"The earners outside don't like us," said the thin young man painfully. "Because we're the cause of their high taxes, and the refugee farms springing up in what used to be their countryside. And the food shortages."

Batul indicated the sack of micro-couscous and the eight-pack of nonalcoholic absinthe pops. "Speaking of which, thanks."

"Don't mention it." Luc placed the mobile on the cardboard box which served as a coffee table, and turned its camera toward Batul. "Batul, have your own early experiences as a refugee prepared you for the way things are today?"

"Not at all. When my family came here from Iraq, everybody was so welcoming... nan told us all English women walked around bareheaded and would make fun of us, but we weren't to lose our Moslem traditions, we were still in the House of Islam. But in the part of London we went to, half the women went around in burqas, and you know what? Not a person in the street was *ever* rude to me for wearing a veil. I was so impressed I took the veil off when I was 16 anyway. My dad went mad."

"What's it like now?"

"Everyone's scared. They think there won't be enough food to go around, they think the anthrax and ricin wards can't carry on treating so many patients, they're scared their oil and coal are burning away too fast in the north. They're scared that if their home town acquires enough refugee farms on its outskirts, it'll get big enough to be a terror target. They're scared the sea levels are rising. Most of the nation's towns and cities are on the coast, you see, and the Little Englanders are scared that when they flood it'll just mean more refugees will come inland."

The kitten climbed up to Luc's lap and began batting at his pencil, turning the word *peur* into *pueur*. "And you don't think the government is up to solving these problems?"

The old man to Batul's left, who had probably seen many governments, cleared his throat. His throat appeared to have more than just phlegm in it, and it took some clearing.

"Everyone thought they would, you see. That's the only reason everyone voted for them when they first got in,"

he added.

"We were just sick of all the big old parties, weren't we, Ernest?" said the old lady squashed into the even older chair next to him. "Just like everyone was sick of the Conservatives and Labour when the Lib Dems first got in."

"But they had to make just as many promises to the media moguls and the multinationals as the big old parties did in order to get into power," said Ernest, "and once they were *in* power, they built all those subsurface-burning power towers, and I think four times as many nuclear reactors as we had before! No, I don't think I'll be voting Green again, no gracious me."

"So who will you vote for?"

"Nobody," interrupted Batul. Her eyes glazed over, and her voice took on the timbre of a litany. "*Your vote is worthless. Nothing ever changes. End it now.*"

"You really believe that?" said Luc, fencing with the kitten with the blunt end of his pencil.

"We all do," said Batul, and reached over to the painfully thin man, whose pimples were a little too regular and coincident with the patterns of his veins to be caused merely by bad diet. She squeezed his hand affectionately. He smiled tenderly – at least, the abscesses in his teeth looked tender to Luc.

"And will *you* be 'ending it now'?" said Luc.

The painfully thin man continued to smile, as if actually proud of the nigh-gangrenous condition of his mouth. The young boy sitting perched on the oil heater, whose infatuation with Batul was embarrassingly obvious, hesitated, then nodded. Luc was certain he recognized the boy, and racked his brain with the question of where from until he realized this was the invisible graffitist, the boy who drew nothing on walls. Next to the boy, Ernest and Wife linked hands, smiling as if on dangerous drugs.

"I think that's a unanimous yes," said Batul.

"And how will you be doing it?" said Luc.

"We have a little something up our sleeve," said Batul. Luc nodded. In the case of the painfully thin young man, what he had up his sleeve was needle tracks.

"I had a little think about Mahayana and Hinayana," said Luc. "Hinayana is the less successful branch of Buddhism, because in it, you keep Heaven to yourself and don't try to talk anyone else into going there. In Mahayana Buddhism, by contrast," he said, "you try to get everyone else to go with you."

Batul shrugged.

"Like I said," she said, "we have no interest in good public relations. You'll see that in due course."

Luc held up the 100-Euro note into the traffic. A passing SUVOL exhaust nearly snatched it away. The All Terrain Segway motored to a halt.

"I BELIEVE YOU DROPPED THIS," said Luc over the roar of fuel-efficient transport.

"I BELIEVE I DID," said the segwayman. He was still wearing his red-and-white scarf, tucked prudently into his windcheater.

Luc handed over a card. It said THE BIG BAD BEAR CLUB.

"THIS IS A CLUB FOR REHABILITATING PAEDOPHILES," said the segwayman.

"WHO ARE SECRETIVE AND LIKE THEIR PRIVACY," agreed Luc. "IN THESE DAYS OF ENLIGHTENED SEXUALITY IT'S VERY DIFFICULT FOR US JOURNALISTS TO FIND SUCH PLACES. IT HAS WHITE NOISE," he added, "AND SOUND-PROOFING. AND SEVEN SECRET ENTRANCES, WHICH ARE DETAILED ON THE CARD. THE CARD BIODEGRADES RAPIDLY IN AIR. READ IT AND MEMORIZE IT QUICKLY."

The segwayman looked at the card as if it were an unexploded bomb. "OKAY. BUT I DON'T LIKE IT."

"YOU MAY BE SURPRISED WHO YOU SEE IN THERE."

Inside the Big Bad Bear Club, it was dark. A notice on the wall said BY GOVERNMENT ORDER THE MANAGEMENT IS OBLIGED TO REMIND YOU OF THE KEY ESCROW LAWS. The clientèle, who varied surprisingly in age and sex, and most of whom kept themselves to themselves, were busy pretending to be eight-year-olds at the various computer terminals.

"That's disgusting," said the segwayman.

Luc shook his head. "No it isn't. The network's only local. They're only talking to each other. I believe they take it in turns to be the abuser or abusee. The sponge or the stone, so to speak. I did a piece on this place about two years ago."

"But that won't make them any better! It'll make them worse!"

Luc shrugged. "Uh, the psychological jury's out on that one." He pulled out a sheaf of papers and dropped them on the table. "Now *this*," he said, "is disgusting. But no one really cares about it, because, actually by definition, everyone being screwed is an adult."

The segwayman put up an admonitory finger. "No one cares, *because no one knows they're being screwed*. Mind you," he added, "I'm not entirely sure, looking round at my fellow men, that most of them could care less if they *did* know."

The papers were all headed with the same logo, the same six Greek letters.

"What was it convinced you?" said the segwayman. "Did you get the code key verified? It's all genuine EU government source."

"Sir," said Luc. "I was educated in a convent. I really don't know a great deal about computers. But I *do* have a classical education." He tapped the Greek logo. "And this isn't the same logo as the one on the main project site."

The segwayman was startled. Luc was gratified. "It isn't?"

"It should say *demos*. The Greek word for 'the Common People,' from which we get words like 'demographic' and 'democracy' – literally 'People Power,' roughly, 'the Rule of the Common People.' But someone on the programming side of the Demos project evidently didn't feel comfortable with putting that word in his logo. That someone was unhappy enough to leave clues to his unhappiness for others to pick up on."

Now the other man was simply confused. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"The word on the Demos programming site is *deimos*. Which means 'Terror'."

The other man's mouth pursed into an "O" of comprehension. "Ah. That would have been Papandreou. He was our project manager for the whole of Vote Counting Logic. He died in a paternoster elevator accident last autumn."

Luc sipped his latté mostrissimo. "You worked on the project?"

"Straight out of college. It was a big, big opportunity for me. To be a pivotal part of the biggest computer project in Europe, the biggest advance in computerized electoral registration since Hollerith, the system that would allow Europe-wide decisions to be made by reindeer herders up in Lapland and fishermen at sea off Mururoa alike, all by phone and automated voting point—"

"Yeah, yeah, I saw the old advertising footage too. It was bullshit. Mobile phone coverage is *terrible* in the sea off Mururoa for some reason. I've been there. Real big game fish, mind you. So, tell me, did you know what you were doing when you were doing it?"

"As God is my judge, I only began to realize about six months in. They kept us compartmentalized, didn't let us talk among ourselves. Security risk, you see. But then I began to wonder, why do they need 15 programmers just to code vote-counting algorithms? Surely by the very nature of democracy, once a vote gets cast, once that bit of data gets recorded, nothing can then happen to it. It's inviolate. And how much code is needed just to count occurrences in a file?"

Luc tried to nod knowledgeably, but was being left behind.

"Anyway," continued the programmer, "I'm the only one left now. Of those 15 of us, 14 have died since we Went Live."

"Fourteen programmers who worked on the same project, dead? Surely someone would have noticed."

The older man shook his head. "The other 13 – everyone but Papandreou and me – were Africans, and Zedlands Africans at that, from Zaire, Zululand and Zimbabwe. The newspapers care less about black faces. And the risk of being shot with an anti-tank rifle in your own bathtub is so high in all three Zedlands countries these days that no one would bat an eyelid in any case."

"But *you're* still alive."

The programmer shifted in his seat nervously. "A bus I was about to get on blew up the other day. Small bomb by modern terrorist standards, most of the passenger bodies were found in the same postcode. *No one claimed responsibility*."

Luc almost choked on his latté. These days, *everyone* claimed responsibility. "Not even the Unborn Foetus Avengers?"

"Not even them. I'd forgotten my moneybelt, you see. Didn't have the exact change. And the bus was that old type that doesn't have a biometric reader to debit your account directly. Had to walk half a mile to work. Don't know what would have been worse, being exploded or the blisters I got from the walking. I have three Segways now, all identical. I ride a different one to work each day. It's exhilarating to feel the breeze ambling gently through your hair."

"So now you want me to go public with this."

The programmer looked alarmed at the thought that Luc might not. "Why not? You're a journalist, journalize."

Luc absent-mindedly fingered a lampshade in the shape of a prepubescent boy, realized what he was doing and withdrew his hand hastily. "It's not as simple as that. There are over 50 news channels in the EU with hit rates of over a million a day. But if you look at who *owns* those sites, that boils down to about ten or twelve people. Very unpleasant people who can make sure an enterprising journalist never works again, or maybe even never walks again. Nothing this big would get published without those people's say-so. It is as black-and-white as all your computing ones and zeroes."

"But *you* don't come from the EU."

Luc blinked. "How do you know that?"

"I've been following you around for a week, ever since *BCBG* did a feature on you. Your friend was at an End It Now demo, trying to convince folk in the crowd to put their heads under the wheels of police APCs."

"Uh, that would have been J-B. He calls it 'proactive journalism.' I wouldn't worry too much about him, he's dead right now."

"You come from Quebec, isn't that right? Both of you?"

"That's right. We haven't installed one of your automated voting systems just yet. But we're due to put a Demos clone in next year. Canada already has one."

"Then you haven't much time. You know how many countries *don't* use Demos-cloned systems? Or the American or Russian systems, which I'll bet a pound to a pinch of shit are worse?"

"Surprise me."

"Discounting countries in sub-Saharan Africa, nine. Quebec, Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet, Kuwait, Kirghizstan, Vatican City, Saudi Arabia and Brunei. The age of democracy is invisibly drawing to a close, M. Giraud. We've had a brief bright interlude where the mice momentarily convinced themselves they were in charge, but now the cats are back. Cats who know how to use computers, or at least," and here he stared miserably into his choca-mocha incredibilmente-massima, "how to get mice collaborators to use computers for them."

"But my government's spent billions on our Demos system. Surely you don't think I can convince them to just take it out in the street and burn it."

The programmer stared at the wall a moment, then nodded sadly. "Particularly since it was probably their bright idea to buy it in the first place." He sighed, as if beginning to convince himself of a thing he'd known for a long time, and rose to his feet. "I'd better be running along."

"Why don't you emigrate? Take the family, rent the house out, sell it later?"

"Nah. I'm thinking positive. I've taken out the most fully comprehensive life insurance scheme known to man. The premiums are crippling. I've insured myself for a sum you wouldn't believe. And guess what?" He sniggered like a naughty child. "One of the major shareholders in the company I'm insured with is the European Minister for Homeland Security."

"You won't do him any damage. You can't hurt people like that."

The programmer deflated. "Well, maybe not. But my family'll want for nothing. Whatever they kill me with, my policy has a clause to cover it."

Luc nodded. In these days of disappearing cities, insurance policies had inclusion clauses, not exclusions.

The programmer squinted at a news flatscreen on the wall. "We may all be goners soon in any case. The End-It-Nowers may be right. Looks like the Micks are going to allow the Americans to use Dublin and Shannon to launch airstrikes into Ulster." He squinted and read further. "President Moore is allowing the UK a further 14 days to get rid of its submarine-launched Weapons of Mass Destruction, which he deems a terrible threat to the stability of mankind."

"Well, 14 days is better than expected," said Luc.

"They *sold* us those WMDs," said the programmer sourly, "sometime in the last century." He read further. "Meanwhile, the head of the European Army, Mitzi Larochevoucauld, has pronounced that her troops are too busy dealing with the garrisoning of Ceuta against possible Moroccan attack and ensuring the peaceful handover of Gibraltar to be deployed in what she believes to be a 'matter purely between America and Britain'."

Luc was amazed. "Surely the UN won't stand for that."

The programmer nodded. "Darned tooting they're not. Russia, India, China, Pakistan, Indonesia and Nunavut have all threatened first use of nuclear weapons if the US goes ahead without UN backing."

"Ha!" scoffed Luc. "Those Nunavut firecrackers can barely vaporize a medium-sized golf course. Why, they notched up less than ten kilodeaths when they nuked Edmonton."

The older man chuckled as he read down further. "Apparently there are US fears Britain might set fire to its oil reserves in the North Sea rather than let them fall into US hands. The poor dears."

He wound his scarf around himself and pushed his way out through the secret door that led up into the lock-up garage behind food.co.uk.

As he left the Big Bad Bear Club, the programmer was killed by a five-metre-diameter self-propelled plastic advertising grapefruit bearing the words BUY JAFFA! SUPPORT ISRAELI INDEPENDENCE! which swerved directly into him out of the parking lot as soon as he mounted his Segway. The motorist's view might arguably, Luc concluded, have been obscured by his grapefruit's whimsical animatronic arms and legs, which capered comically across his field of vision. In any case, the driver, a swarthy character who the newspapers would have no difficulty classifying as an asylum seeker, leapt straight out of his fruit, took one look at the programmer's prone body (bending down carefully to check for lack of pulse, a detail Luc was sure most of the witnesses on the pavement would forget) and scarpered.

"Bastards," said Luc feelingly. "I bet his life policy doesn't cover *that*."

The grapefruit driver was pelting towards what looked like the steps to some sort of pedestrian underpass. Luc

looked at the grapefruit, then at the Segway. Having never before driven an electrically-powered citrus fruit, and being unsure what manner of chassis and control system lay beneath the firm and juicy bodywork, he plumped for the Segway.

The controls were familiar – a large “on” switch in the middle of the control column. The programmer’s ignition code was still dialled in to the vehicle. Luc hauled it upright, hoped a youth misspent at his hometown Segwaydrome would stand him in good stead, plunged his feet into the safety cleats and leaned forward for all he was worth. The machine was more powerful than he was familiar with, and had wafted him sedately across the road into the traffic before he’d even had a chance to say a dozen Hail Marys. He heard the blare of horns and collision alarms, and the scream of automatically applied brakes. Airbags punched out of windscreens to right and left of him like giant arctic jellyfish rising through ice. He had to take both arms off the control column and hand off the wall, twisting his hips to steer as he entered the stairwell.

Luck was on his side.

At the bottom of the steps, the grapefruit driver had run into a pair of *real* asylum seekers, probably Ibo by the look of them. Ibo had been showing up in the Union in their millions since the US had discovered mass destruction weapons existed in the Nigerian oilfields. Luc reminded himself that it was wrong to prejudge people purely on the basis of their brightly coloured tribal headgear and economic circumstance. As he reminded himself of this, the Ibo demonstrated the degree to which they’d blended seamlessly into contemporary British society by drawing mugging switchblades on the grapefruit driver. Prepared though they were for the cut and thrust of modern British life, however, they were apparently not prepared for their muggee to pull out a military automatic and shoot them both dead with gulp-making accuracy. But the gunman was too well trained a government assassin not to stop and feel the throats of the two muggers for a pulse, and in that moment Luc bounced silently into the small of his back from behind in a perfect Olley Segway with Reverse Backward Spin. To do him credit, as he collapsed hugging what had to be several snapped ribs, the citrus pilot held on tight to his gun without shooting himself in the leg. Luc spun to a stop on a gröschen, hopped off his machine, picked it up and whacked the fruit operator round the back of the head with it. *That* made him let go of the gun. It might also have made him let go of life, but, Luc reflected, you couldn’t have everything.

Incredibly, he was still conscious. Luc scooped up the gun while he still had time.

The jaffa chauffeur opened an eye. “What are you doing with that thing?” he said.

“Nothing, if you stay still,” said Luc.

The fruitist licked his lips. “Would you mind putting your finger on the trigger guard, in that case? Your hand is shaking.”

“Who told you to kill that man? Why did you kill him?”

The grapefruitman shrugged, forcing alarmingly red blood out of his mouth. He coughed. “I dunno. Was told

to. I mean, I didn’t. It was an accident.” He was having trouble focusing on the end of the gun.

“You don’t even know, do you?”

The other man shook his head.

“Who did you vote for in the last General Election?” said Luc.

“Dunno,” said the man. “They’re all the same. Whoever had lower taxes, I guess.” He failed to focus on something just past Luc’s left shoulder. Luc looked to the left.

The man moved for the gun, faster than Luc had believed him capable. He got all the way up to it, just in time for Luc’s finger to tighten on the trigger, in panic rather than on purpose. A keyhole-sized space leaked blood discreetly from his chest. He tipped forward. A manhole-sized void steamed in his back.

Luc looked around, scanning his immediate environment a full 360 degrees along all three sets of axes. There were CCTV cameras. They had all been smashed. The Ibo had prepared their mugging territory well.

Over the roar of traffic on the overpass, not even a gunshot could be heard. But as Luc listened, he *could* hear a sound, a repetitive, painful scraping, as if something somewhere in the stairwell was giving birth.

He leaned round the corner and squinted into the dark at the base of the steps. Far beneath, a squat green plastic something was waddling unsteadily into the alley on heavy metal feet. On the front of it, a helpful municipal council had printed the message PLACE RECYCLED WASTE IN CORRECT RECEPTACLE OR FACE PROSECUTION.

Shielding his face from view, Luc took careful aim and fired, once, twice, three times. The litter bin recoiled, then finally tumbled backward down the steps, legs waving helplessly. Luc uncoiled one of the Ibos’ bloodstained headdresses and advanced on the bin, threw the head-dress over the place where he imagined its camera must be, and ran on down the steps, wiping his fingerprints off the gun with a spit-moistened handkerchief, realizing his saliva would contain DNA that could also be used to track him, whimpering in frustration, tucking the gun back into his pocket, realizing the safety was still off on it, spending several minutes on a crowded pavement figuring out where the safety was while pedestrians stared at him in fear, then finally turning round in panic and staring into his own face looking out at him from a POLICE BULLETIN flatscreen. At first he was alarmed. Then his polarizing lenses pulled out the text from the transmission. *Giraud is wanted for murder*, said the text. *He is considered armed and dangerous*. There was explanatory blurry CCTV footage of him shooting a man dead with a gun. Oddly, however, it was not the man he had just shot.

Ah, he thought. *The irony*. His oppressors had digitally faked a homicide just to get him pulled in by the cops, and here he was, armed and dangerous and a homicide anyway.

Cackling, he took aim at himself on the flatscreen, and fired. Passers-by scattered like birds. He turned and let fly at the 30-foot M-Blobo-the-EuroSanté-Silicon-Implant which stood on top of a nearby sterilization clinic. Sadly, M. Blobo turned out to be a ten-metre

advertising hologram rather than a plastic figurine, and only wobbled hazily and winked at him. Gritting his teeth with rage, he spun round and took out a parking meter. A tiny hole winked in the front of it. A shower of coins spilled out the back. In the near distance, he heard the howl of police sirens.

Then, the world went white.

At first, he thought maybe he had been shot, and the searing brightness was the bullet motoring through the optic centres of his brain.

Then he realized.

Holy Christ, Batul, was that the "something a little different" you had up your sleeves? A tactical nuclear weapon?

As the heat flash dissipated – it had been so bright he had no idea what direction it had come from – he noticed graffiti scrawled on walls, windows, fences, even living people, in some ink presumably only designed to luminesce when subjected to light Brighter Even Than the Sun Itself. NO WAY OUT. END IT NOW. He saw a man stumble past, staring down aghast at his own midriff, which was a mass of molten rayon. Another man, completely unharmed, stood watching the first, still clutching the remains of a folded newspaper. Luc noticed the paper was intact, with the spots where newsprint had been burned through in tiny, exact holes. The first man had been wearing a black T-shirt, the second a white one. Heat flash, Luc reflected, was a capricious thing.

He saw the shockwave coming before it hit, a giant wave that seemed made of water rather than air. Even water surely should not be able to shatter buildings and carry them before it in its wavefront. But Luc, just like most citizens of the civilized world, had been trained for this eventuality. He threw himself behind the nearest large arched reinforced concrete structure, an underpass underneath the overpass. The shockwave hit like an all-over-body good hiding, and tried to force Luc's eyeballs back into his head and inject itself into his ears to jellify his brain, but he already had his fingers delicately jammed into the latter organs. As a good journalist, however, it was his duty to keep his eyes open. Cars poured through the underpass beside him like flotsam tumbling in the air current.

And then, there was peace.

Luc rose to his feet, along with other citizens who'd been similarly well-prepared by government infomercials, and surveyed the vista of a city that looked like a nursery full of knocked-over dominoes. On every smacked-flat wall, the END IT NOW slogan still glowed like white polyester under a UV light, re-radiating the stored energy of perhaps a kiloton or so of TNT.

Belatedly, the WMD alarms were sounding.

Groggily, he winced himself to his feet and stumbled up the concrete steps that led to the top of the overpass. The steps now ended in mid-air. But up at the top of them, he found what he was looking for. He hauled the All Terrain Segway upright and activated the motor. Built to military standards, it still worked. He forced his feet into the cleats, leaned forward, and bumped slowly away downward, step by step. Just as he left the stairwell, it collapsed down into its own foundations.

He made it to the perimeter before the barricades went up. This being a WMD incident, as soon as the barricades were in place around the LD-50 zone, everyone inside the wire would be a "zombie" and fair game for government euthanasia snipers. It had been a small bomb, luckily. Evidently Batul's nuclear-fuelled hedgehogs had had relatively meagre power sources. Outside the LD-50 cones, Red Cross paramedics were waiting. Luc dimly remembered, as he tumbled off the Segway, that NHS paramedics refused to attend WMD sites. Middle-aged women wearing wholly inadequate elbow gloves and face-masks led him to the back of an ambulance where he was asked whether he was feeling nauseous while his clothes were removed with batters and tweezers into a bath of inert jelly, and he was scrubbed with a wire brush and a long pole. Then they started on his hair with electric clippers. *All* of his hair. He stood very very still.

All the time, the man in black stood, arms crossed, watching him from an antiseptic distance. No one had stopped the old man, or even questioned the reason for his presence. The man had the ability to go anywhere, Luc knew – even into places where other people might face violence and death, and pass unharmed.

"Good evening, father," said Luc. "I'm not quite ripe for confession yet. If I swallowed any Pu-239, you may collect my immortal soul in about a year's time."

The priest nodded. "Once you're decontaminated, I can offer you a lift." He looked up at the contorted sky. "It does look like rain, after all."

Drops of drizzle, big, fat, and black, were already beginning to fall with the consistency of waterbombs. The Red Cross paramedics scampered for their vehicles and began erecting hasty and utterly useless bacofail shelters over the windows. Luc was left standing in the gathering rain, facing the priest stark naked and bleeding.

The priest beckoned to a long black limousine. The vehicle had a smooth slab of a bonnet without air intakes of any kind, and rubber seals on its doors; the thick grey glass in its windows spoke of radiation shielding. Luc shrugged and walked to the car. The priest sat down beside Luc in the sofa-sized rear seat, and at his signal, a chauffeur of oddly Middle Eastern appearance drove on.

"In answer to your unspoken question," said the priest, "yes, I am a homosexual. I am a priest, after all. But if that makes you think I'd go for a scrawny specimen like you, you've got another think coming." He grinned toothily. Luc was unsure whether or not he was actually serious.

"We'd been watching Blithe, the KAMELOS programmer, for quite a long time. We were naturally suspicious of a computer language that took one hundred billion Euro to develop and then ended up being known only to ten people five years later. We abhor waste, you see, and it was with the abhorrence of waste that our investigations started – have you figured out who we are yet?"

Luc looked around himself critically. "The Vatican?"

"We are the Vatican, Saudi Arabia, Tibet, Nepal, Brunei, Kirghizstan – all the few remaining places in the world that have not yet been touched by the taint of democracy. Those few nations still strong enough to dare to call themselves tyrannies. We have seen the grip of DEMOS and sys-

tems like it tighten on unsuspecting populations round the world, and we do not like it, M. Giraud."

Luc could not help feeling guilty for bleeding on the suede seats. "Let me get this straight. A bunch of tyrannies have a problem with someone who has simply found out a cleverer way to do tyranny?"

The priest raised a finger. "That is just it! That is exactly it. For several centuries now, the so-called 'free' people of the world have been barracking us to change our ways and resign as Popes and Sheikhs and Lamas to make way for the Will of the People. But how do you know what is the Will of the People? How does anyone know, in any modern nation, how one million of his fellow citizens voted? M. Giraud, it is now easier for an enterprising tyrant to set up shop in any of your so-called democracies than it has ever been before."

Luc stared at the lines of WMD wagons passing in the opposite direction, sirens wailing, barricades lashed to their sides, snipers hanging off in NBC suits.

"Your master is not even a Pope," he accused. "Since Rome stopped one and you moved the Roman Patriarchy back to Antioch."

"Indeed," nodded the priest, appearing to take this in very good spirits. "And when Mecca 'stopped one,' as you so delicately put it, the Ka'aba was airlifted with great care to Damascus, possibly still in a glowing condition. Kissing the damn thing has become more of an act of faith than it was previously, that's for certain. Damascus is only a few miles down the road from Antioch. Do you observe a pattern here?"

"The world's remaining dictatorships are gathering to defend themselves against the democracies?"

"Quite so, quite so. America, China, the EU and Russia have been enforcing democracy round the world with suspiciously aggressive eagerness in the last few years. And always, it's the democratic suite favoured by the invading force that goes into the voting computers. Demos in Zimbabwe. The USA's Universal Suffrage Algorithm in Iraq, Cuba and Colombia. Russia's own system in Belarus. China's own system in North Korea. Japan's in Fiji."

Luc was unimpressed. "You're starting a war you can't win. You have no armed forces. The enemy are almost entirely in control of the airwaves, even of the newspapers."

"M. Giraud," said the priest, "you're talking to the fuck-

ing Catholic Church here. We were washing men's brains well before you scientific primitives invented digital television and the printing press. There are thousands of churches worldwide where we're going to be broadcasting the word of tyranny into men's minds as soon as we've prepared our ground. And our heretical Islamic associates will be doing the same in the mosques, and the rabbis in the synagogues, and the lamas in the temples. You see, Luc, we *believe* in tyranny. We live happily under a benevolent dictatorship every day of our lives on earth."

He kissed the crucifix hanging round his neck.

"Was there ever a democracy?" said Luc. "Did we just delude ourselves?"

The priest appeared to consider this.

"There was," he said. "A true democracy, where every decision was voted on by every man. I believe it happened in a small town called Athens for few hundred years or so before the ascent of Philip of Macedon. No one could agree on anything. Mob orators wielded more power than the wisest and most intelligent of philosophers. I need hardly remind you that, in the Peloponnesian War, Athens got its butt kicked by an oligarchy, and that its crowning democratic achievement was the execution of Socrates."

He shuddered, staring into the clumps of radioactive muck streaming down the lead-glass windshield.

"All I can say is, roll on Alexander."

Dominic Green's previous stories for *Interzone* include "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" (issue 162), "Queen of Hearts" (issue 173), "Blue Water, Grey Death" (issue 175), "News from Hilaria" (issue 179) and "Heavy Ice" (issue 187). He lives in Northampton, and he wishes the following to be known: "It has occurred to me that people reading this story might think me to be some sort of dolphin-hugging Peace Primate. I am nothing of the sort. Reluctantly, I support the Coalition's efforts to rid the world of Saddam Hussein, if only because I can't see any credible alternative."



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A Walk in the Woods

The squirrel scampered among the branches of the oak tree, chattering facts about its host in a Disney-style voice. Vincent Cornell made a mental note to reprogram the creature at the earliest opportunity.

"Sessile oak:
WiredWood.org/Welby/oak27, age
92 years, height 35 metres. Sessile
oak..."

"Details," said Vincent.

A table of data materialized in
front of him, seeming to hang in

Vaughan Stanger

the air like some wraith of the forest. Several of the entries for this tree were blank, while others required updating. Three-and-a-half years after its inception, the Wired Wood project had yet to establish a complete inventory of the local flora and fauna. The task of updating the database was a routine but enjoyable aspect of Vincent's work. After he had finished dictating the entries, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The aromas of growth and decay delighted him, as always.

The crackle of twigs breaking underfoot jolted Vincent out of his reverie. A pale-faced young woman emerged from behind the oak tree and walked towards him. She was dressed in combat trousers and a white tee shirt that emphasized her willowy physique. Her grin revealed teeth that were slightly crooked.

"Those aren't ordinary sunglasses, are they?"

She spoke with a Welsh accent, but there was a hint of small-town America too. It was an odd yet beguiling combination. Vincent gave a nervous little laugh.

"They're a new designer style. A thousand Euros a pair."

"Really?" Her frown suggested that she was not convinced by their fashion potential. "I'm guessing they've been augmented in some way."

"That's right," he said. "They let me view data overlays generated by my belt-top." He tapped a forefinger against the wallet-sized device. "I'm conducting a survey for the Wired Wood project. You might have seen a documentary about our work on BBC4 last year."

The woman brushed aside a few strands of auburn hair that had blown across her face. "Yes, I did watch that programme. But I'm afraid it didn't convince me that connecting forests to the Web was a good idea. In my view, Welby Wood ought to remain a refuge from the *unreal* world." She made an expansive gesture, as if claiming ownership of the stands of oak and hornbeam.

"I'm afraid that's not how our masters in Brussels see things," he said. "'Logged-in for life' is their slogan. Still, our work is not all dull tagging and cataloguing." He extracted a spare pair of glasses from his rucksack. "Here, try these on."

The glasses slid down her nose like a skier approaching a precipice. She allowed him to adjust the fit, not seeming to mind the physical contact. When he pressed a stud on the side of the frame the lenses darkened to full opacity, obscuring eyes that were black as peat.

Vincent spoke a series of commands. A moment later, her head was jerking from side to side. He grinned at her even though she could not see him.

"What am I looking at?" she asked.

"Squirrel-cam footage."

She pushed the glasses up onto her forehead. "You are joking, right?"

"No; the video is genuine. I recorded it yesterday."

She watched some more of the footage before handing the glasses back to him.

"I suppose it might just start a craze for Vermin Video. Not really my thing, though."

"Most people seem to enjoy it," he remarked.

"Well, I'm not 'most people'!"

Stung by the put-down, Vincent held up his hands in a gesture of contrition. "Look, I'm sorry if I offended you. Let's start again, shall we? I'm Vincent..."

After a brief pause, she said: "And I'm Rachael." With that, she turned away from him, bringing their conversation to an unequivocal end.

Vincent felt a pang of desire as he watched Rachael stroll along the path, her slender body dappled with sunlight. He was tempted to follow, but something in the set of her shoulders indicated that she wanted to be alone. Shortly after she disappeared from view he heard a loud sneeze ricochet through the trees, accompanied by the clatter of crows spooked from their treetop homes.

Feeling pleased with himself, Vincent unclipped the videophone from his belt. His progress report was overdue.

"Hard at work today?"

Vincent glanced up from the soil acidity equipment, which he was attempting to recalibrate. Rachael was standing between two hornbeam saplings, her exposed forearms as smooth as their bark. Her smile was beguiling.

"Hi, Rachael," he said. "It's lovely to see you again."

Which was a simple statement of the truth, for Vincent had greatly enjoyed Rachael's company during their half-dozen encounters in Welby Wood.

Her reply was lost to a succession of sneezes, each more powerful than the last. Vincent noticed that the tissue she held to her nose was spotted with blood. Concern tightened his face into a frown.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Still dabbing at her nostrils, Rachael ambled up to him.

"I'm fine," she said. "The kindergarten is closed today, so I thought I'd pester you instead." She winked at him. "You don't mind, do you?"

Before Vincent could reply, a red-cross icon buzzed across his field of view, alerting him to an infection in one of the saplings.

"Sorry, Rachael, but this is urgent. I've got to log these readings immediately."

She sighed and turned away.

Ruing the lost opportunity but mindful of his responsibilities, Vincent set to work. He removed his digital camera from its pouch and began recording images of the stricken hornbeam. Most of its leaves seemed healthy, but he found several that were disfigured by brown splotches. He picked up a leaf that had fallen to the ground; it felt brittle as ancient parchment. Fearing the worst, Vincent cut a strip of bark from the base of the tree-trunk. A dusting of spores smeared the interior of the sample jar.

Vincent spent half-an-hour downloading data from every tree in the glade. It was a task that would have been much simpler if Welby Wood's rural-area network had been installed as planned. Unfortunately, the necessary funding had yet to materialize.

Having instructed his computer to perform a quick-look analysis of the data, Vincent placed a video call to Karl Badoer. Sky-blue eyes and an unkempt moustache smiled back at him.

"I've just been talking to a friend of yours," Karl said,

panning the camera to frame Rachael's face. She looked embarrassed.

"You seemed preoccupied," she remarked. "So I decided to walk to the lake. Where I bumped into your colleague..."

"Sorry about that, Rachael," he said. "I'll be with you shortly." She rewarded him with a smile that dispelled his sudden pang of jealousy, but which could do nothing to lessen his disquiet about the hornbeams. "Could you pass me back to Karl? Thanks..."

Something in his tone must have alerted the engineer, for his grin had given way to a frown. "What's the problem?"

"It looks like we've got a major fungal infection in the north-eastern sector."

"I see... Should I set up a video-conference with Brussels for this afternoon?"

"Yes, that would be a sensible precaution. In the meantime, I've got a preliminary DNA analysis running. We should have the results in ten minutes or so."

Vincent broke the connection and started to jog along the path that would bring him to Summerhouse Lake. Constructed by some minor nobleman in the early 19th century, the eponymous building had long since rotted away, but the lake it had once overlooked continued to thrive, providing a haven for pike, perch and waterfowl.

When Vincent reached the gravel path that encircled the lake, he spotted Karl and Rachael standing next to a bed of reedmace. Rachael was wearing Karl's spare pair of glasses. They seemed to be sharing a joke.

Without warning, Rachael's laughter broke down into a series of gasps. Her eyes flared with panic as she tipped the contents of her rucksack onto the ground. After a brief rummage, she located an inhaler. Several doses were required before her breathing returned to normal.

During the attack, Vincent had felt powerless to help. Now, he wished he could do more than just sound concerned.

"Are you okay, Rachael?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied, while repacking her rucksack. "There's really no need to worry." She smiled at Vincent and then turned to face Karl. "You were just about to show me another of your tricks..."

Karl glanced at Vincent, who responded with a shrug. The engineer frowned, but seemed willing to comply with Rachael's request. He pointed towards a nearby weeping willow. "Look over there."

Intrigued, Vincent activated his infrared link to Karl's computer. Seconds later, a pair of fox-cubs emerged from the undergrowth. A beautiful, honey-coloured vixen followed them onto the bank. The cubs darted in and out of the foliage, ambushing each other.

Rachael's sigh expressed a regret that had become almost universal of late. "Such lovely creatures," she said.

"It's a pity about the cull," said Vincent.

Karl shrugged. "We could not risk a rabies epidemic."

"I suppose not," Rachael said. "But seeing Karl's party piece has made me wonder what else is virtual around here."

Rachael scanned the periphery of the lake, sliding her glasses up and down her forehead. After several seconds, she pointed across the water. "That silver birch isn't real

for a start."

"We lost it to the Blight five years ago," said Karl.

Vincent raised his eyebrows, but his colleague's expression remained deadpan.

Rachael handed the glasses back to Karl with a sigh. "Maybe there are times when illusion is preferable to reality."

Her sombre remark brought the conversation to an end. As he gazed at the lake, Vincent found himself wishing that Karl would make an excuse and leave. To his intense annoyance, it was Rachael who moved first. After a handshake that left Vincent feeling dissatisfied, she wandered off into the trees. A few seconds later came the familiar volley of sneezes.

Karl cleared his throat. "I think your friend is allergic to Welby Wood," he said.

Before Vincent could reply, a loud beep from his computer informed him that the data analysis was ready. He glanced at the results and groaned. "Maybe she's reacting to the spores from this bastard."

Karl inspected the results on his own display. "Is that what I think it is?"

"I'm afraid so. It looks like some idiot of a gene-hacker has released a mutated variant of the Blight. But this time it's attacking the hornbeams."

The warbling of the videophone was only just audible above the sound of branches creaking in the wind. Even so, it was sufficient to distract Vincent from his work. Annoyed by the intrusion, he spoke the shutdown command. The panorama of silver birch trees faded to grey. He glanced at his feet. Only a moment ago, he had been standing on a carpet of bluebells. The illusion had been beautiful – a reminder of Welby Wood in its heyday. The silver birches were long gone of course, likewise the flowers they had once shaded. And now the more numerous hornbeams were under attack.

Vincent removed his tri-D glasses and pushed one hand against the rear wall of the chamber, which swung upwards with a hiss. The phone was still ringing, indicative of an unusually persistent caller. Most likely it was the project monitor, who would doubtless repeat her previous warnings about overspending the equipment budget. It was usual for Karl to handle such calls, but he had chosen to go to the pub for lunch with the other members of the team.

The videophone was hidden beneath a broken display screen that someone had deposited on the workbench.

"Vincent Cornell here," he said.

To his surprise, he found himself staring at Rachael's face. She had never phoned him at work before. Her wide-eyed expression made it clear that she was scared of something.

"Vincent... I need... your help." Her words were punctuated by painful-sounding gasps.

"What's the problem?"

"My inhaler... I can't breathe!"

"Where are you, Rachael?"

But he had guessed that already. Two weeks earlier, he had warned her not to enter Welby Wood until the Blight

was eradicated. Evidently she had ignored his advice.

"Help me!"

"Rachael, you must tell me *exactly* where –"

Before he could finish, his view of Rachael's face was replaced by a blur of clouds and treetops. Then the image blanked out.

"Rachael, are you all right?"

Faint crackling sounds emerged from the speaker.

"Rachael, can you hear me?"

There was no reply.

"Rachael?"

Fearfully, Vincent broke the connection and phoned the emergency services.

Vincent rubbed a forefinger around the inside of his collar. For some reason he had felt compelled to dress more smartly than usual. Unfortunately, his wool-mix jacket was too heavy for the sticky warmth that pervaded Den-high Ward's reception area.

The nearest door opened, revealing a woman whom Vincent almost mistook for Rachael. She had the same auburn hair and skinny physique, but the prominent lines on her forehead indicated that she was several years older. He introduced himself, trying not to sound apologetic.

"Good morning, Vincent," she said in return. There was a reserved quality to the greeting, as if his suitability was

being assessed. "I'm Josie Warren – Rachael's sister."

"It's good to meet you, Josie." He offered his hand in greeting.

Her handshake was as firm as her expression.

"Do you know what to expect when you see Rachael?"

Vincent shook his head, not knowing what to say. On the two occasions he had tried to visit Rachael the ward sister had turned him away, claiming that she was not well enough to receive visitors. Whenever he phoned, what little information he received had only served to heighten his anxiety. Finally, after four weeks, he had received a phone call from Josie. Two speed cameras had flashed at his car while he drove to the hospital.

"I'll be candid," said Josie. "There isn't a lot more that can be done for Rachael. Ever since her early teens, she has suffered from a wide range of steadily worsening allergies. Dust, pollen, plastics, food additives – you name it, she reacts to it. But thanks to a specially tailored drug regime, she has been able to cope. Until last month, that is. Because those spores she ingested in Welby Wood induced an allergic response so severe it shut down her immune system. Permanently, according to her consultant."

Under his breath, Vincent cursed the anonymous gene-hacker who had let loose this new form of the Blight. Five years ago, during the first outbreak, Rachael had been living in Kentucky. This time, tragically, there would be no sanctuary for her.

"Surely there must be some kind of gene therapy that would help?"

Josie shook her head. "The doctors have tried everything."

"But there *must* be something!"

"I'm sorry Vincent, really I am. If we sealed Rachael inside an isolation chamber she might survive indefinitely. But both of us know she would never consent to that. She's too much of a free spirit."

Vincent realized that he could not deny Josie's prognosis, even though her apparent composure made him feel numb. He wanted to rage at the unfairness of it all, but Josie's presence made him bottle up his emotions. All he could do was nod.

"One last thing, Vincent." Josie was staring into his eyes now, as if hoping to impose her will by hypnotism. "Rachael can be very demanding, never more so than now. Please don't make any promises that you can't keep."

"I'll be careful."

"Just remember what I said."

Josie pushed open the door to Rachael's room. A strong draught wafted past Vincent, as if even the air-conditioning system had been programmed to resist his admittance. But the scene within made him smile.

Digital wallpaper displayed images of an immaculate lawn bordered by elegant, varicoloured shrubs, with steps leading down to a fishpond covered with water lilies. Above Vincent's head, cumulus clouds sailed across a vista of pale blue infinity. From hidden speakers came a medley of bird-song. The illusion of standing in an English country garden was surprisingly convincing, Vincent thought.

Rachael was dozing in her wheelchair. Behind her, a blossom-laden apple tree gave the illusion of shade. Josie

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patted Vincent's forearm, as if to reinforce the briefing he had just received.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Vincent sat down on the edge of the bed and waited for Rachael to wake. Less than a minute had passed when she smacked her lips and mumbled something unintelligible. She blinked at him repeatedly, as if the real world was harder to focus on than any daydream.

"Hello, Vincent," she whispered. "It's good to see you again." She tugged her dressing gown around her body, in a charming if gauche attempt at modesty. The effort seemed to drain her of energy.

He reached over and patted her forearm, unconsciously mimicking Josie. "Thanks for inviting me, Rachael. I've really missed you."

Rachael smiled. "Well, you're here now... which is all that matters... Anyway, how've you been?"

"I'm very well."

He tried to come up with some small talk, but soon found himself faltering. Rachael seemed unimpressed with his efforts.

"Has a fox... stolen your tongue?"

Before he could reply, she reached for the oxygen mask that dangled next to the wheelchair. To him, it seemed that her vitality was wheezing away with each hard-won breath.

"Rachael, why didn't you phone for an ambulance? Calling me instead, that was..." He was going to say "stupid," but he looked into her eyes and shook his head instead. The truth was that the delay had made little difference.

Rachael seemed to think so too. Ignoring his question, she steered the wheelchair around him, intent on inspecting a flock of butterflies that fluttered above a buddleia bush. Vincent followed her across the room, powerless to resist her undertow. He stood by her side and studied the simulation. One of the red admirals was struggling amongst the blooms, having lost a wing.

"Poor thing," said Rachael. "Not long for this world."

Vincent stared into the distance, too choked to say anything.

Rachael tugged at his hand. "I need your help."

"I'll do anything for you, Rachael," he said. "Anything at all."

"I want you... to take me back... to Welby Wood... for one final walk..."

Vincent turned away, unable to maintain eye contact any longer. He knew that his offer was reckless. Even if Rachael were fit enough to walk, which he doubted, Welby Wood was out of bounds for the foreseeable future.

"I can do it!"

Rachael's tone was so insistent that Vincent felt compelled to turn and face her gaze. Blinking back tears, he watched in astonishment as she heaved herself out of the wheelchair. He held out his arms for support, but she shook her head. She managed half-a-dozen steps before collapsing onto the bed.

As he tucked the bedclothes around her, he said, "Maybe in a few days. If you can build up your strength up a bit."

Vincent knew he had told a lie; knew too that he had responded to Rachael's request in exactly the way Josie

had warned against. Even so, he felt no guilt. It was Rachael's wishes that mattered, not her sister's desire to supervise the process of dying. And even a forlorn hope was better than none.

As he sat by Rachael's side, he found himself recalling his father's terminal illness, a decade earlier. Throughout those last few pain-racked months, William Cornell had tried to organize a final trip to his beloved France, to bid farewell to the country he loved. Each night, he had fallen asleep with his passport tucked under his pillow, convinced that his family was trying to frustrate his plans. He must have known he was too weak to make the journey, but his determination to give his life a fitting end had moved Vincent deeply.

As he pondered Rachael's request again, it occurred to him that there might be a solution after all.

"Don't worry, Rachael," he said. "We will find a way."

Vincent swore under his breath as he watched Karl pace around the laboratory. The engineer seemed determined to stamp his indecision into the concrete floor, applying scientific rigour to a matter that required a simple "yes" or "no."

"What's the problem, Karl? We could do this so easily, with minimal impact on the budget. And it's not as if we can do any fieldwork at the moment, with Welby Wood under quarantine."

Karl came to a halt by the rear wall of the visualization chamber. He began stroking his moustache with his fingers, a quirk that generally preceded a decision.

"I have strong misgivings about your proposal. If our 'friend' at HQ ever discovers what we are up to..."

"She won't," Vincent insisted.

"How can you be so sure?"

Vincent sighed; he was well aware that his argument was based more on emotion than logic.

"Look, even if she did find out, we could tell her we were testing Virtual Welby Wood to determine its suitability for disabled users. That's a worthy goal, surely?"

The engineer grunted but said nothing.

"You will help Rachael, won't you?"

Karl groomed his moustache some more before acquiescing. Vincent patted him on the back and returned to his work station.

As Karl had doubtless surmised, there was a great deal of work still to be done.

Vincent felt a chill in his stomach as he watched Rachael steer her wheelchair into the laboratory. Earlier that morning, Josie had told him that her sister had only weeks to live.

After a breath so deep it sent a shudder through her entire body, Rachael pulled the oxygen mask from her face. To Vincent, the skin below seemed as fragile as a leaf that had succumbed to the Blight.

"So this... is where... you work." Rachael gestured towards the equipment on the workbench. "Impressive."

Vincent glanced at Josie, who was standing just behind the wheelchair. Her taut expression suggested the aftermath of a quarrel. He raised his eyebrows in a bear-with-

me expression, hoping to diffuse the tension.

"Welcome to the Wired Wood project and its happy band of researchers." He waved towards Karl, who was fiddling with one of the power cables that fed the walls of the visualization chamber. "You remember my colleague, Karl Badoer?"

The engineer smiled at Rachael. "There are usually six of us working here. But today, the others have gone on leave. Vincent has been most... persuasive."

"I am grateful... to you both." Her words ended with a painful-sounding gasp. She raised the oxygen mask to her face and seemed to gain some relief.

Not for the first time, Vincent found himself wondering whether Rachael's consultant had been wise to let her leave the hospital. Then he recalled his father lying on a metal-framed bed, morphine dripping into withered arm, while monitors beeped away the last moments of his life. William Cornell had died with one hand resting on a cheap French paperback. The bookmark revealed that he had just begun the final chapter.

"Are you ready... for me yet?"

Vincent shook his head, but not in response to Rachael's question. No, he told himself, she was much better off here, fighting for every last breath while pursuing her dream.

"Almost," he replied. "Don't worry, we'll soon have you walking..."

He kicked aside the thickets of cabling that were threatening to obstruct Rachael's progress, and helped to position the wheelchair just behind the rear wall of the chamber. Satisfied, he pressed a button on the remote control. The wall swung upwards.

Rachael peered inside. "Do I get... a guided tour?"

Vincent stepped into the chamber and spread his arms, as if claiming ownership of the territory within.

"The walls, floor and ceiling are lined with liquid crystal displays, which double as audio speakers. When the system is activated, it generates an audio-visual simulation of a three-dimensional environment, such as the interior of a building..."

Rachael smiled at his joke, which made him feel somewhat less nervous, but he could tell that she was anxious about something. Her left hand kept tapping against the side of the wheelchair.

"Can the floor... take the weight?"

Josie broke her silence. "Rachael's wheelchair weighs 150 kilos with her sitting in it. Karl told me yesterday that the floor is only rated for two adults." She jutted her chin at Vincent, as if challenging him to refute her assertion.

Vincent chose to ignore her; this was one problem that he had anticipated. If necessary, he would carry Rachael into the chamber.

"Here, let me help you," he said.

Rachael shook her head. "No," she gasped. "I want to do this... on my own."

Josie glowered at Vincent, as if assigning him the blame for her sister's behaviour. He shrugged; Josie's anger meant nothing to him. The two of them watched in silence as Rachael struggled out of the wheelchair. Pain etched her face as she tottered into the chamber,

supported by a wooden walking stick.

Vincent glanced at Karl, who responded with a thumbs-up gesture. Satisfied that everything was ready, he stepped into the chamber and smiled at Rachael. Her eyes were bright with anticipation. He swung the rear wall into position, sealing Rachael and himself inside the featureless void. Briefly, he found himself wondering whether eternity would be like this.

Dismissing the thought, he placed a pair of tri-D glasses over Rachael's eyes. When he grasped her right hand, she allowed his fingers to mesh with her own. He did not need to look at her face to know that she was smiling.

Before he could tell her how he felt, the sights and sounds of Welby Wood engulfed them. Rachael cried out, this time with delight rather than pain. Her eyes darted to and fro, drinking in the panorama of oak trees and hornbeams. From every direction came the sound of bird-song and the rustling of leaves. Vincent could almost smell the aromas of springtime, although he knew that was one detail Karl had been obliged to omit, for fear of triggering an allergic response.

"Are those pads... used for walking?" Rachael was staring at a pair of raised hexagonal patches that could just be discerned against the undergrowth.

"Rachael, I think it might be safer if you let me..."

She shook her head. "I'm going to walk... whether you like it... or not!" Her hand slipped out of his grasp, as if to reinforce her decision.

Vincent conceded defeat with a sigh. "Okay, Rachael, but please take it gently. Every footstep registered by the pads will move your viewpoint forward slightly. To get the best effect you must maintain a steady rhythm."

Swaying like a sapling in a gale, Rachael raised her left foot off the floor. It dropped onto the pad as if made of stone. The scene juddered around her.

"You see?" she said. "I can do it!"

But when she attempted a second step, the rubber tip of her walking stick skidded sideways. She crashed to the floor with a despairing cry, banging her head as she fell. Fearing that Rachael might have lost consciousness, Vincent bent down and lifted her into a sitting position. Her head lolled against his chest.

He was still holding her in his arms when the rear wall hissed open. A moment later, Josie was standing at the threshold with her arms crossed. Her expression was livid.

"I did warn you, Vincent. I did tell you not to make promises that you couldn't keep."

He ignored her. In his mind's eye, he was strolling arm-in-arm with Rachael, following a winding path that would lead them to Summerhouse Lake.

Reality jerked him out of the beautiful illusion.

The truth was that Rachael would not be going for a walk in Welby Wood, virtual or otherwise.

Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

The last hour had tested Vincent's nerves to the limit. He paced back and forth, mulling over the events of the last few weeks, while Karl sat in front of the laptop, making final changes to the software. Eventually, Vincent could endure the tension no longer.

"Are you sure this set-up will work?"

Karl sighed. "Rachael will see herself walk. That's the best I can do..."

A week had passed since Karl and he had tried to brainstorm a solution in their favourite Indian restaurant. At one point, Karl had proposed strapping Rachael into a force-feedback exoskeleton. He explained that his animation software could be used to stimulate her limbs into a semblance of walking. Vincent rejected the idea, pointing out that Rachael might easily be injured or worse. In any case, after the fiasco in the laboratory, Rachael's consultant had forbidden her to leave the hospital.

In the silence that followed, Vincent had picked at his food, tasting nothing, before pushing his plate aside. When he looked up from the table, he noticed that Karl was gazing at the restaurant's décor.

"Does Rachael's hospital room have digital wallpaper?"

"Yes, it does," replied Vincent. "Oh, I see... But hang on, how do we get her to walk?"

Karl stroked his moustache. "I have an idea..."

The engineer had worked long into each night, modifying software that had previously been used for animating foxes and squirrels. For his own part, Vincent had pleaded with the hospital authorities for permission to reprogram the digital wallpaper in Room Eight of Denbigh Ward. The consultant's objections had faded away like snow in a thaw when confronted with an expression every bit as resolute as that of his patient. Persuading Josie to hand over her digital images of Rachael had been much harder, but after a furious row she had acquiesced...

A loud click from the door brought Vincent back to the present. Rachael rolled into the room, trailing an intravenous unit. Her face was as pale as the bedroom walls.

Josie followed the wheelchair. Her lips were pursed so tightly they seemed empty of blood. There must have been a row, thought Vincent, but quite how it could have been conducted was a mystery to him. The accident in the laboratory had left Rachael unable to speak.

He lifted Rachael out of the wheelchair, taking care not to dislodge the IV line. When she was comfortable beneath the bedclothes, he whispered, "Not long now."

Realizing too late what he had just said, Vincent was relieved to see that Rachael had either missed or chosen to ignore his *faux pas*. Instead, her eyes were bright with anticipation, expressing a feeling that could no longer be spoken. Vincent, too, found himself unable to speak, so he busied himself inspecting the cable that connected Karl's laptop to the hospital's data network.

The silence had begun to seem oppressive when Karl announced that everything was ready. Vincent sat down next to Rachael and clasped her right hand. As their fingers intertwined, the whiteness of the walls gave way to a vista of majestic oaks and spindly saplings, sun-dappled footpaths and impenetrable briars. A gentle breeze soughed through the branches. From above came the chatter of crows.

Vincent glanced at Rachael. She was gazing intently at the familiar scene, but the movement of her legs beneath the quilt gave him an inkling of her frustration.

"It's okay, Rachael. You *will* go for a walk; I promise."

He took a deep breath and pressed a button on the remote control. Two people emerged from a stand of hornbeams and walked towards Rachael. Vincent mouthed a "thank-you" to Karl. The engineer had excelled himself in personalizing the avatars.

The pair came to a standstill. They waved at Rachael before turning away. The Vincent figure glanced back over his shoulder, inviting her to follow.

Vincent passed the remote control to Rachael. "You can make her walk wherever you want. It's really no different to controlling your wheelchair. Just use the miniature joystick. Like this." He guided her thumb. "Yes, that's it."

Rachael's first few 'steps' were little better than drunken lurches, which seemed destined to end in collision with the nearest tree. Yet with a little practice and some judicious assistance from Karl's computer, she soon had her avatar striding around the glade. From time to time, Vincent had to remind himself to operate his own remote control, so engrossed was he in her progress. But now it was time for him to take charge.

"This way!"

Vincent had directed his avatar onto the path that led to Summerhouse Lake. He knew it would be a short walk, lasting barely five minutes. He suspected that it was the most Rachael could manage.

The lake had just come into view when her avatar began to falter. It stuttered forwards a couple of steps, then another, before finally coming to a halt. Vincent glanced over his shoulder. He was astonished to see that Rachael had discarded her oxygen mask and was sitting upright. Her spindly arms were trembling as she reached out towards her own image.

Vincent detached the IV line and lifted Rachael up off the bed. With his left arm clamped around her chest and her head resting on his shoulder, he operated both remote controls as best he could. The two avatars resumed their short journey to Summerhouse Lake. Rachael's heartbeat seemed fainter with every step.

When the avatars reached the path that girded the lake, Vincent dropped to his knees and placed Rachael on the ground. With the utmost delicacy, he turned her head so that she was looking out across the water towards her beloved trees. He watched as a faint smile flickered over her face, but the light in her eyes was beginning to fade: late afternoon surrendering to a twilight that would last forever.

He kissed her gently on the lips. "Hold onto this moment, Rachael."

Then, with the faintest of sighs, she died.

The mist that cloaked Summerhouse Lake reminded Vincent of a funeral shroud, but the clamour with which its denizens greeted daybreak helped to dispel the illusion. In an hour at most, the sun would burn away the mist and reveal the trees that still fringed the lake. This was one part of Welby Wood that had retained some of its beauty. Elsewhere, the intensive programme of gene therapy had saved less than a third of the hornbeams.

Vincent had not visited the lake since Rachael's death. In the months that followed, his life had entered a state

of suspension while he participated in a series of empty rituals. A post-mortem, a funeral, an inquiry into misuse of project resources; none of these things had mattered to him. In the final analysis, all that mattered was that he, with Karl's assistance, had helped Rachael bring her life to a fitting end. That he had lost his job in the process had come as no surprise, though Karl's decision to resign in a gesture of solidarity had touched him deeply.

The engineer was standing next to him now, gazing at the lake, immersed in his own memories.

"Did you bring the disk?" Vincent realized the question was superfluous but felt a need to move on – to make the most of the day.

Karl reached inside his fleece and pulled out a jewel-case. "I hope this will bring you some comfort, Vincent." His voice was thick with emotion.

Vincent patted him on the back. "Thanks for everything." After a final handshake, Karl departed.

I owe him so much, thought Vincent.

After walking halfway round the lake, he stepped onto an overgrown footpath that would lead him into the heart of the woodland. Within minutes, he was pushing through tangles of thorn-bushes, heedless of the cuts to his hands and face. The first rays of sunlight filtered through the branches, dappling him with camouflage.

When he found the perfect glade, he shrugged off his rucksack, closed his eyes and turned to face the sun. He basked in the warmth, content to have escaped the world of petty rules and procedures, if only for a while.

Satisfied that he would not be disturbed, he loaded the contents of Karl's disk onto his computer. When the set-up process had finished, he donned his glasses and inspected the scene.

Leaning against one of the hornbeams was a slim, dark-haired woman. She favoured Vincent with a beguiling smile; then pushed herself away from the tree and resumed her walk. Casting no shadow, she flitted between patches of sunlight, following a path that was new to him.

Vincent checked the battery read-out and smiled. There was still plenty of time.

Vaughan Stanger is a new writer who lives in Wealdstone, Middlesex.

Stories of his have appeared in *3SF* magazine and in a couple of other small-press venues, but the above is his first contribution to *Interzone*.

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Screw

John Shirley

The first time the world shook, it was five in the morning, Pacific time, and the shuddering of the planet jarred Colin from a dream of shame and regret.

He was squirming halfway off his futon, dreaming, his feet overturning a coffee cup, and the wet on his bare heel had become water from the toilet overflowing around his feet as a detective in the dream told him he was busted for killing some guy: a man he'd killed to hide embezzlement. The detective wavered, vanished into the blue light of the television screen Colin had left on when he'd gone to sleep... as he sat up in the otherwise dark room, flailing for a hold, just as the shaking stopped.

But he knew the shaking hadn't been a dream. He could see a lamp overturned, a couple of fallen framed pictures, in the electric-blue light from the neon sign of the Chinese restaurant downstairs, that cryptic ideogram burning like eidetic psychedelia against the black and grey San Francisco sky.

There were sirens yowling outside, and car alarms squalling like awakened infants. Had the Big One come, finally?

Some sick feeling – some bone-deep feeling, resonating from his core – told him that this was no local earthquake. This was planetary. This was...

"It was like a big shared hallucination," Tanlee was say-

ing, three and a half hours later, in the kitchen of the penthouse where Colin had his temp job.

They were standing by the microwave, waiting for the little plate of chocolate croissants to heat up, each of them sipping from a mug of the Peet's coffee provided by Inter-Real. An international real-estate company – its workings beyond Colin's meagre business understanding – Inter-Real was headquartered in London, but the firm's chief of staff, Mrs Koyne, maintained offices all over the world.

Tanlee glanced at her watch. "I went into my roommate's bedroom, and I'm all, 'Linda, did you feel that?' And she goes, 'I think I dreamed it – but wait, you dreamed it too? No way!'" Tanlee was second-generation Asian American with a Southern California accent: she'd grown up in Sherman Oaks.

The microwave chimed and she turned lithely to take the plate out, put it on the counter. As she did this Colin looked at her tight retro clothes, ironic leopard-pattern capris and sleeveless shell sweater, her tiny little feet in her tiny little black shoes, and tried to picture her modern-dancing: gracefully gyrating, meaningfully writhing – into his arms. She was mysterious to Colin: she could play the Asian Val, but then she'd change direction, and what he thought of as "her real mind" would emerge. As now, when she tore a corner off the croissant, nibbling at it as she said, "Um – Miss Koyne's going to be here soon. And I'm sort of... scared to be here when she gets here. Do

you ever, like, get that feeling that there's all these lines converging in your life, like all kinds of things are coming together and when they meet they might, like, explode?"

He wasn't sure what she meant, but he liked her confiding in him. Maybe one of these days she'd stop making excuses about going out. So he said, "Oh yeah." With as much conviction as possible.

"It's like, I have this theory? That there's some lines of events that are from your own life? And other lines are from outside? And they have some relationship you can't see but they are, like, mutually attracted according to some... some law we don't know about?"

That vapid tone, thought Colin, and making everything sound like a question – she sounded like an airhead till you really listened to what she was saying. It was as if she were embarrassed about her intelligence.

He nodded. "I know what you mean – kind of, um, intuitively. And that thing everyone felt last night..."

"Exactly. And there's something about Mrs Koyne that –" She broke off, glancing at the door. "So how's your writing coming? Did you finish that play?"

He was a little taken aback by her shift of topic. It was as though something had spooked her. She was looking toward the front of the penthouse.

He picked up a croissant, but didn't feel like really eating it. "I finished a draft of it..." He was embarrassed to be an aspiring writer at 32 with nothing but a few literary-zine publications behind him, some college drama sketches produced – if you could call that produced. He felt like his own personal drama was stalled; he was perpetually waiting in a green room somewhere.

Then he felt a gust of cold air that raised goosebumps on his shortsleeved arm – why was the air so cold, coming from the enclosed hall where the elevator was? – and he knew that Mrs Koyne was in the penthouse.

That's when the second world-shudder came. He felt this one mostly in his intestines, in a way, deep in his gut but coming from the direction of his navel; an invasiveness that made him go up on his tiptoes for a moment – Tanlee did the same, her eyes widening – as the building rumbled to itself. Their centres of gravity – his, Tanlee's, the building's – wavered like tops losing spin. His heart thudded and he thought: *This really is the Big One* –

And then it was gone. Or – it had moved on.

He leaned panting against the counter. "What the fuck was that?" He felt close to throwing up.

"Some adjustments are being made," said Mrs Koyne, coming in. "Old accounts being closed."

Colin thought at first she was replying to his blurted question but now he saw she had been calmly talking on the cellphone to someone. The headset phone was so cunningly worked into her frosted-black coif, it was as if she were talking to the air. Mrs Koyne was a tall woman, angularly slender to the point of anorexia, with large green eyes in a V-shaped face. She was sealed into a low-cut iridescent designer dress-suit, just a hint of a slit up the skirt; smoke-blue Italian pumps, a loose lady's bracelet Rolex on one bird-boned wrist.

She swept with imperial indifference through the small

space of the kitchen, so that Colin and Tanlee had to back against the counter. Their employer strode to the refrigerator, got the pitcher of veggie juice drinks always waiting for her, poured green liquid into a tall glass while speaking into the designer mouthpiece arcing like elegant jewellery near her thin, pink-glossed lips.

"Just tell them that – yes, China too – all the factors are coalescing, the timing is perfect. I have one or two indicators to check but InterReal is already on the move, we're closing the deal."

Colin glanced at Tanlee, thinking to share a look of amazement at Mrs Koyne's complete lack of response to the earthquake. But the look on Tanlee's face – as she leaned against a cabinet, one hand on her midriff, gazing at Mrs Koyne – was bitter resignation. So much older, so much wiser than Colin had ever seen her look before.

"Exactly... right. I'll see you up there." Mrs Koyne reached up to her right ear and switched off the tiny cellphone, turning to Colin and Tanlee.

Colin wanted to be impressively cool-headed but he found himself stuttering. "Um – maybe we should get down to... to, I don't know, the street or – wherever we're supposed to go in case of an earthquake?" Then he realized she was staring at his hand with distaste. He saw that had convulsively clenched the croissant during the shudder, dough and chocolate squeezed out between his fingers along the back of his hand and dolloped on the otherwise immaculate tile floor. "Oh jeez, I'm sorry – I just – Christ—" Washing his hand in the sink, cleaning the floor with a wet paper towel. "– I just... I was startled by... by that quaking..."

"Maybe we *should* go downstairs, though, Mrs Koyne," Tanlee said, watching the other woman closely.

Mrs Koyne chuckled pityingly. "You thought there was an earthquake? Nonsense. A little quiver, is all. This is California, aren't you used to it by now?" She sipped at her juice and set it down.

"Shouldn't we at least check the news channels?" Tanlee persisted.

"By no means. We've no time for pointless fears. This is a critical time for us. Now come along. Let's get cracking."

They followed her, reluctant but drawn in the slipstream of her authority, into the big main room of the penthouse. Taking up most of the top floor, the vast room was organized around a single flat-black desk with three chairs, in the middle of the rust-coloured carpet, and two dark-brown leather sofas facing one another. The sunlight suffusing the room was thinned by polarized window walls on two opposite sides. Three mobiles hung from the ceiling – two Miro and one Calder – but since there was scarcely a breath of air moving in the big room, they hung immobile, as if freeze-framed. There was a big computer hard drive in the centre of the desk, connected to Mrs Koyne's monitor and two smaller monitors and keyboards on the sides. Mrs Koyne had already laid out sheafs of hard copy to work from.

Colin felt strange, taking his usual leather swivel chair at the little work station set up on one side of the big desk; Tanlee sat across from him, Mrs Koyne at the larger chair

between. It was strange because he could still feel that planetary shudder echoing in his nervous system – it was like the feeling you get just before the stomach flu comes on – and he was pretty sure they ought to be heading for some earthquake shelter somewhere. Wasn't there one in the basement of this high-rise?

But the computer booted up near-instantaneously, as if in feverish excitement, and Mrs Koyne's fingers were already flying over the primary keyboard. She clicked on the InterReal multiple-input program and they began the data entry that she'd been guiding them through for weeks, each of them filling out different sections of the same form.

Some days Tanlee would go off by herself to do errands for Mrs Koyne, to fetch her lunch, to pick up her dry-cleaning, to sort through voice mail. Today she and Colin were tapping away like drones to Mrs Koyne's ant queen, entering buy numbers, dates, strange foreign place-names, sending form letters for eviction to agencies who were bribed to implement them, transferring money and deeds – or that's what it was supposed to be, but it was hard to tell what it really was, so Colin thought. Just now he seemed to be helping Mrs Koyne buy an apartment building in Hong Kong, but –

Suddenly he was aware that she had stopped typing. She seemed to be listening, with her head cocked. Then she turned her head, the motion sharp and abrupt, to stare at him, unblinking, her smile pitying, and crooked.

"Tell me about the last thing you remember dreaming, Colin," Mrs Koyne said. "I mean – last night. Can you remember?"

Colin stared at her, and had to make a conscious effort to close his mouth so he wouldn't be gaping. "Uh – what I dreamt?" From any of his friends, this would not have been an odd question. It was something the bohemian types he hung with would talk about. From Mrs Koyne it was startlingly unprecedented. "Well – I dreamt I was... was being..."

"Accused? Was it *accused*?" She leaned toward him. Her breath smelled like a burnt-out match.

And he was astonished that she'd hit it right. "Well, yeah. I guess it was – a detective... a plainclothes cop... accusing me of murdering someone. And embezzling. And the weird thing was when I woke... it was like... I dunno..." He glanced at Tanlee, embarrassed.

Mrs Koyne pressed him, "It was like you were – *ashamed*? Even after waking up, and even knowing you hadn't embezzled or murdered?"

"That's... pretty amazing, Mrs Koyne. Yes. I felt ashamed – though I knew it was a dream." He tried to chuckle companionably. "You have a bug under my pillow?"

"Not as such." She turned to Tanlee. "And you?"

Tanlee's face had gone hard, her brown-black eyes brittle. "I don't recall."

"Oh, come. A dream in which you were accused of a crime you never committed... and for which you felt *ashamed*, even after you woke and knew it was but a dream? Yes?"

Tanlee shook her head briskly. "No!"

But Colin knew, somehow, that Tanlee was lying. It was in the way she'd fractionally shrunk in on herself,

sitting there, as if trying to protect some vulnerable place. She *had* dreamed something like that. How did Mrs Koyne know? She'd never spoken to them of any psychic ability – they'd never spoken of *anything* personal, except when now and then she asked about career plans, and family, in a polite, chilly, fill-in-the-blanks kind of way that seemed to suggest she'd rather not know anything more than the minimum.

"Ah!" Mrs Koyne said, then, looking fiercely into the computer.

There was a kind of light in her eyes, in her whole face, a hungry intensity Colin had never seen before as she murmured, "Yes – here too, the dreams prefigured the noumenal adjustment – all is exactly on schedule..." He realized she was speaking into her headset, though he hadn't seen her switch it on. Who was she talking to? He had never met Mr Koyne.

He glanced at her computer monitor – and his heart seemed to *squeeze* out the next beat, as if barely making it from one beat to the next.

Mrs Koyne's monitor was oozing colours onto its plastic frame, onto the keyboard and desk. It was as if the colours of the software windows, primary colours no longer digital but with an electric tinge – a lot like that ideogram sign outside his window at home – were solidifying, liquefying, running, and then *stretching out*, twining like yarn, elongating through space to web the room. And within the multicoloured strands pulsed something pink, which he sensed was some impossibly vital essence of human flesh, with now and then a glimpse of an elongated eye slipping through the tube of light; a distended mouth, teeth and fingers rippling by and gone, each liquefied person passing with a sound like an infinitely dopplering moan, a thousand, a million moans layered and overlapping...

Colin was up and lurching backwards, away from the elastic, probing, searching flesh-charged moaning light, so that he stumbled over his chair and fell hard on his right side – and found himself staring at a seeking tendril of flesh-pumped coloured light coming across the floor, right at his face like a sizzling rivulet of hot wax.

"Shit!" and he scrambled back away from it – just as another long, planetary shudder rippled through the world. Again he felt it nose through him, as if it had sought him out *personally*, and it knew his name and his whole life, and the feeling made his gorge rise, his muscles convulse, so that he squirmed on the carpet and moaned, his moan sickeningly like the moans still reverberating from the overflowing computer.

The quaking died down – but this time commenced again almost at once. A little plaster sifted down from the ceiling, and there were shouts of fear from the people in the offices a storey below, barely audible under the collective moaning from the spreading strands of fleshy light. And the mobiles turning jigglingly near the ceiling.

He rolled away from the living, toxic glimmer – he didn't know how he knew it was in some sense toxic, he just knew. He sat up, and Tanlee was standing over him, bracing herself, rocking slightly as another shaking passed through, and putting out her hand to him. He

took it – a small hand, but she was strong and pulled him to his feet. They clung to each other for a moment, as the building creaked and quivered. Where had Mrs Koyne gone? He could no longer see her.

A kind of living, weaving tree of light was twisting through the open spaces of the room – he ducked back as it stretched toward him. And there – a crack was spreading through the farthest glass wall, from the lower frame. *Crick*, it cracked a little farther. A hesitation. Then, *crick*, a new direction. A waiting. A shiver. *Crick crick crick – and CRICK–*

The entire wall of glass shattered and fell away with an in-gust of wind and a symphonic crashing – Tanlee giving a small scream, Colin hissing “*Fuck!*” They staggered as the air sucked at them. The mobiles spinning, tangling, falling. He realized that if the nearer wall had burst they’d have probably staggered to fall 23 stories down. They steadied one another, and Tanlee shouted something he couldn’t hear over the moaning from the still spreading lights, crackling of flames from somewhere below, sirens, the rumbling of buildings uneasy in their sockets, the crackle of glass and the sough of wind.

Another long planetary quiver, and the vibration seemed to roil the living light from the computer, to draw it in a twisting suction toward the window. There was something else, something he thought was like a tornado, in the urban distance, but a whirlwind impossibly big, big as a mountain.

Tanlee tugged at him and he let her draw him along the creaking, crick-cracking glass wall to their left, toward the corridor leading to the bedrooms and the door out of the suite. Tanlee shouted something in his ear. He made out only part of it: “I’ve known for a while... wasn’t human... some of them are, and some aren’t... I saw into her once... she... a bottle that could move and there was a thing in it... intelligent but not... I stayed to find out, to know... Those who sent me...” A glassy crash and roaring of intrusive air, from behind, drowned the rest of her words.

The suite’s bedrooms were used only occasionally by InterReal execs, sometimes by Mrs Koyne – and she was there, he saw, as Tanlee drew him through the bedroom door.

Mrs Koyne was rotating in place in the exact centre of the large bedroom, the heels of her pumps dangling about an inch off the carpet. It was as if she was on a turntable going a little faster than 33 rpm, but there was no turntable. Something unseen was turning her, upright in space. She seemed quite content, more overtly happy than he’d ever seen her.

One of the strip of windows had shattered and the gold-coloured curtains flapped; another long shudder rippled through the building and the walls showed a slowly spreading crack, and an abstract painting fell, its glass cover tinkling into shards, its chaotic imagery celebrating the room’s disintegration. All the while, Mrs Koyne spun in place, smiling. Perhaps going fractionally faster now. Colin felt a wave of nausea shimmer through him – it seemed to match the subtle vertical undulating Mrs Koyne was making with her whole body, as she rotated;

sensual, up and down, a kind of *feeding* in that motion.

“Oh... motherfucker...” Colin heard himself say. “Tanlee, if you understand something, anything about any of this...”

“She has begun...” Mrs Koyne said. She paused as she rotated away, speaking rapidly as she came back around, completing her sentences in passing segments. “...to see...” She whipped around. Came back. “...some others have...” Gone, back: “...far too late... I knew... they sent her... to observe me... but it didn’t... matter at all... We have been here for so long, our roots deep... into the organism... of the world...” Was she spinning faster now? “You must... have known somehow... years ago... when you... saw the wo...rld despoiled... sucked... dry and... used up... that someone... that many... from outside... were feed...ing.”

The building gave a great lurch, then, and an accompanying tremble ran through Colin, and Tanlee too – somehow he could feel it passing through her as it passed through him, through the medium of the vibration passing – and they had to clutch at the walls to keep from falling. But the walls themselves were falling, the wall behind the double-bed bending toward them, breaking along the bend. Mrs Koyne seemed utterly unconcerned – her smile flashed by unchanged.

“You... might... go... to roof... for... a... few more... moments... togeth...er...” Mrs Koyne said, her voice coming more high-pitched.

In the whirling blur of Mrs Koyne it seemed to Colin that some inner verity was unveiled, and he could see a vaguely woman-shaped thing, but with stretched-out lamprey mouths in a spiral pattern all around its body, and puckered vents issuing giggling pink smoke – this glimpsed inside the shell she had shown the world... the world now shuddering apart.

Tanlee was weeping, shouting something angrily, over the shrieking, grinding walls and the flowing moans, the rising chorus of sirens – Colin could only make out, “Some of us knew... no one would listen... we’re not just fodder, this isn’t your sheep ranch...”

But the rackety high pitched sound from Mrs Koyne, blurring now, might have been laughter – no, it was some other, inhuman mode of expression compounded of glee, triumph, mocking pity, and giddy relief: the release of unspeakable feelings long suppressed.

Colin took Tanlee by the wrist and pulled her down the rollicking hallway – remembering a State Fair funhouse he’d liked as a boy, where the floor buckled all rubbery underfoot, and now the laughing white-faced, red-lipped vampire face whose mouth had been the entrance of the funhouse had engulfed the world with its rapacious grin.

He paused at the door to the hall – the door which was changing shape from a rectangle to a rhombus – and glanced over his shoulder down the hall to the main room. It was murky in there, except for piercing, lancing forks of light emanating from the wreckage of the computer, from light sockets, wall plugs, all of it angling, bending toward the shattered window facing the bay.

He turned away as the floor gave another convulsive lurch under them, and he pulled Tanlee through the col-

lapsing doorway, down the dust-choked hall to the utility stairs. The warped metal door hung open. Up the stairs, even as the walls cracked so wide they could see adjacent buildings, swaying, through the fissures.

Then Colin and Tanlee burst into the windy open from the little outbuilding, onto the roof.

The roof was sheathed with aluminum and a white insulating gravel, crisscrossed with external ventilator conduits – one of these was buckling now, as if to greet their arrival, snapping up to wave like a ragged blade at the roiling sky. A girder had already broken somewhere below, jammed up through the roof, and as it seemed stable they went to it and clung on, gazing about them, their eyes drawn to the sky where the clouds spun, spiralled inward toward the thing that dominated the city; that owned the horizon:

It was an impossibly big, dull-silver tornado shape, tapering toward the ground, spinning over San Francisco Bay to tower over the Bay Bridge, its top lost in spiralling mists. But as they gazed they saw that it was not a tornado – it wasn't a construction of dense air, or even debris whirling in air. It was something solid. Solid, but turning. There was a translucent spinning envelope of energy around the grey inner shape that made it seem like a whirlwind – but the solid inner shape wasn't in fact turning rapidly. Within the envelope of energy it was turning about once every second, or second and a half.

From the windows of crumbling buildings all around them the seeking feelers of living, flesh-crawling light branched and nosed and oozed toward the great inverted cone driving itself into the bay. Like the clouds, the sea-water below, the debris sucked toward it, the branchings of restless light twined and tightened around the turning shape digging into the world, near where it made a sucking funnel of the water. With each distinctive turn of the inner core of the striated cone, came another planetary shudder. Colin felt a shadow of comfort in being able to see the source of the quaking.

There was a sputtering *thud* behind them, penetrating the thick background clamour of the disintegrating city, and they turned to see the roof burst open in a shape like a flower petal opening, neatly folded back petals of metal and substructure and insulation, and from the flower rose a whirling murk of tattering fabric, exposed flesh, hair whipping about blurred grin: Mrs Koyne. She ascended over the roof and made that gleeful tittering sound of relief again, and then – still vertical relative to the rooftops – flew toward the great twisting steely cone digging into the world out in the bay.

Other buildings were rupturing in exactly the same way; flowers of torn metal disgorging whirling, laughing figures that zipped through the sky to converge around the inverted cone. Only a few came from each building.

"Her kind," Tanlee shouted over the din, "they are showing themselves now."

"Someone sent you to spy on her?" Colin asked.

"Some of us have known... I had to play a role, and watch, and try to find some way..." She shook her head. "There was no stopping them. We gave them the world

in the last century."

"Who? Who are they? Are they like... aliens?"

"They're from *outside*. But they're not from another planet in the way you..." The rest of the sentence was swallowed up in a great roar of protest from the infrastructure of the city itself, its streets and foundations and pipes and wires and girders, all twisting out of shape as the screw turning in the bay tightened another thread – and this turn of the thread pulled everything fatally out of alignment, and drew it closer to the screw.

That's what it was, Colin realized – Tanlee knew it at the same moment, he could feel that – the thing digging into the world was a *screw*, a literal screw, an unimaginably gigantic screw, extending up through the troposphere into the tropopause, maybe beyond, a screw digging down through the bay and into the sand, down into the soil, biting the rock, penetrating the crust, the magma, eventually the core of the Earth itself.

The expected smoke undulated up from the shattered buildings – the billowy motion like Mrs Koyne's undulation as she spun – and the expected flame licked and jetted, but it seemed almost muted, secondary, as another change was making the conventional destruction of an earthquake something that didn't apply: the city's hard shapes had softened at their edges, as if the fabric of material reality was redefining to accommodate the great screw digging into the world –

The screw turning, digging in, pausing-turning, pausing-turning, pausing-turning-digging deeper –

The city's metal and glass and concrete becoming something rubbery, infused with a unifying glue that kept it in one stretching piece, the shore distending out to join with the sea – which seemed to grow glutinous, around the threading column – all of it merging to twine around the great screw, and to draw into its substance...

As their building began to move – the building he and Tanlee stood on was like a cobra slithering with its upper length held up over the ground, toward the bay, toward the great screw twisting into the planet – Colin realized what was happening. "It's screwing into the world and... absorbing it... taking all the strength and energy and order from it and sucking it up into itself. It's digging in – and then absorbing so it can dig in some more..."

"Yes," she said, slipping an arm around his waist. "Look! You see how Mrs Koyne's people..."

"They're not people!" he shouted angrily.

"They're a kind of people! They're not so different – they're a parasitic species from some dimension – the fifth dimension, maybe – and they're not so different from us, which is why they can work with us – you see them up there, floating in the sky, arranged around the screw? They're feeding, through it! But most of what they're stealing is going back to their world – pure living energy, the life force of Gaia –"

"Those streamers of lights – liquid people in them, from the computer –" He broke off as the shuddering redoubled, the roof responding by wrinkling up under their feet, its square top becoming a diamond shape pointed at the screw. All the squares of the city becoming diamonds, narrowing diamonds, angling toward the

monumental, the vast, the ineffably gigantic screw.

"They're like phantoms – metaphysical –"

"What? The noise!"

"– metaphysical reverberations from the suffering, the exploitation, the sheer *wringing* of life from people and the world – and we were part of it, we were part of the corporation, the society that fed on it all, me and you, taking part in gouging the planet, pushing people out of their rightful places, so that *they* could suck up their strength, their hope, their spiritual force–"

"But that was all money, they were just taking money, it's just... currency!" he shouted. Thinking now he was hearing the real Tanlee, meeting the real Tanlee – when it was too late.

"Well, what does that –" Another phrase lost. "– say 'currency'? Money's like the radioactive tracers they put in blood so they can see it move, in labs! We were all part of selling our world out to these soulless things – moral choices have metaphysical results which then affect the fabric of re–" An echoing roar from the city blotted the rest of her statement. But Colin could feel the rightness of it in his quivering bones.

Colin thought about it, as the city went soft and mutable and coursed toward the great screw crunching deeper with each quaking turn into the shivering world. Not long before he'd heard about the floral industry importing most of its roses from third-world countries where a pesticide banned in the USA was causing stunning numbers of cancers and birth defects in field workers – the industry knew and *didn't care*; he'd heard of lobbyists who'd suppressed every effort at banning goods from countries using child-slaves for labour; he'd heard of an estimated half a million American tourists having sex with children for money overseas; he'd heard of people working ten hours a day in this country and still homeless; he knew the oceans, the rivers were sickened with mercury, with thousands of venomous pesticides, with sewage and run-off from landfills big as towns, so that thousands of sea creatures, canaries for the "coal mine" this great screw was gouging out, washed up choking, dying every year; he knew that the great forests were being razed, and villagers in Southeast Asia were driven at gunpoint to forced-labour camps where they constructed pipelines for the multinationals. He knew that wealthy, club-dancing debutantes sported glittering diamonds that enriched mass-murdering dictators. And on and on it went.

People knew these things were happening – *but some-one always prevented anything really significant being done about them*. Who? Who let this go on, and ever grindingly on, like a great screw twisting into the world? Ordinary greedy human beings? Could they really be so shorn of feeling for the planet, of empathy for suffering innocents?

No. Humanity had to have been infiltrated. Seduced, distracted, entranced. Enslaved.

And all of it had led to this moment, this culmination; the patchwork harvesting had ended and now had come the final harvesting of the world.

As these thoughts swirled in his mind so the sea, the

city, the land, the great Bay Bridge itself, twisted like debris sucking in a drain around the great, the ineffably gigantic screw that was biting, digging deeper and deeper into the world, with a grinding noise that grew so loud no further talk could pass between him and Tanlee, and there was only their embrace. Too late for sexual intimacy, there was only the intimacy of shared despair. For there was no hope of escape – when even the mountains and the core of the Earth were being drawn into the great spinning shaft... and what remained of Colin and Tanlee's roof, too, rushed toward the towering screw.

Now their part of the crushed city, the compressing rooftops, were spinning around the steely shaft, just as tiny strips of wood are pulled around a drill digging into a plank, and Colin, staring up at the stupendous screw, could see there were distinct sharp screw-threads in the side, just exactly like a woodscrew but each thread wider than an eight-lane freeway. And looking past the screw as they were pulled around and around its shaft – too amazingly caught up in the majestic dismantling of the world, too overwhelmed to be frightened – they saw the crumbling, melting skylines of other cities from far away: Hong Kong and London and New York and Denver and Peking and Moscow and Cairo and others they didn't recognize, pulled into the screw. But Colin knew that in those cities, it seemed to people there that the great screw was above them alone. It was all one screw but it somehow manifested – physically, materially, yet also metaphysically and immaterially – in each city separately, all at once.

All the cities of the world were being drawn through some transdimensional shortcut to converge on the screw, the one great screw that in a thousand separate places was digging into the world, *creak-creak-squeak, screeeeee*, screwing right through its heart. The planet twisting around the screw, sucking into it as if collapsing into an out-of-control black hole. Screaming millions deliquescing into concrete, asphalt, melting steel and gushing magma, sizzling seawater–

Near the end, just before they were sucked into the merging of roof and metal and sea and flesh and stone and lava, Colin and Tanlee looked up along the turning, sharp-threaded shaft of the screw. They saw clearly that it was a thing of energy, and a thing of metal at once; that it was an expression of the city, of the world, and that it was also otherworldly; they saw that it was death for some, life for others.

And then the screw turned one thread more.

John Shirley, who lives in California, wrote "What Cindy Saw" (*Interzone* 5) and "The Unfolding" (with Bruce Sterling, *Interzone* 11). He is also the author of numerous novels and story-collections published between the 1970s and the 1990s. It's good to welcome him back after so many years away from these pages.

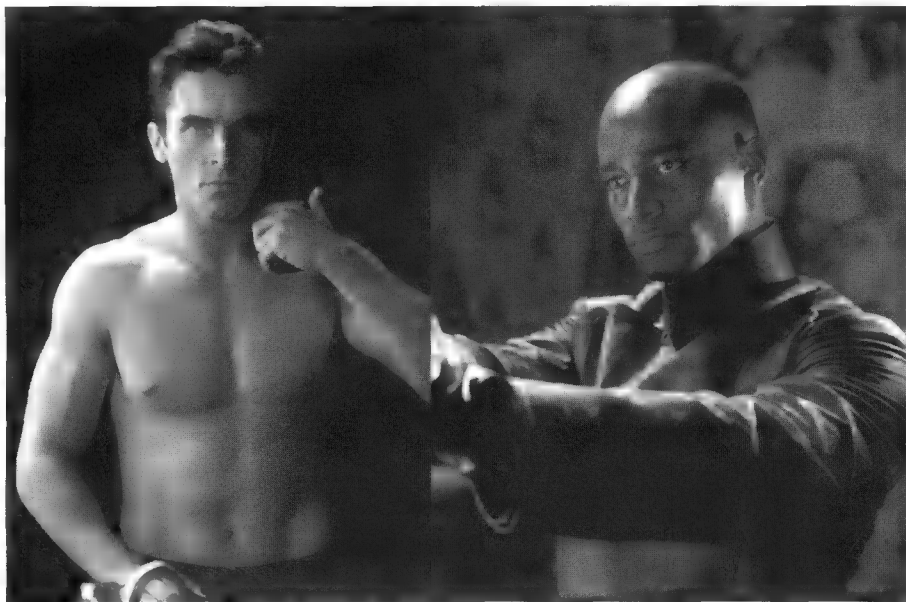


I still can't get used to them, these Resurrections. It doesn't matter how much lox they knock back, or how many times you slam them in a pod and blast them into space: we wake up and there are these loved ones from our deepest past, previously remembered only in old videos, looming over us as if they'd never been away. It's not as if they're even real; they're made of some kind of massless particle, beamed out by this vast, incomprehensible remake factory which steals our dreams while we sleep and brings them to life for its own perplexing purpose. Is it testing us? tormenting us? exploiting us? rewarding us? As the final *Solaris* adverts said, in what sounds like a *cri de coeur* by the studio about the movie and vice-versa: "No one knows what it wants, no one knows what it means, no one knows why it's there, yet all are drawn to it; to some it brings joy, to others it causes great pain." And in the process of setting fire to a \$47m pile of Fox's money as part-payment for *Ocean's Eleven* and *Twelve*, Steven Soderbergh clearly went through a version of the *Solaris* experience himself, as all who try to make this story must. Even Stanislaw Lem himself had to use the writing of the novel to answer his own question of what *Solaris* would turn out to be, and he famously fell out with Tarkovsky at script stage when

the film-maker's answer came out different. Thirty years on, he still vehemently deprecates the 1971 film, which it has to be admitted did slash away all the things that made *Solaris* a Lem novel in the first place — the vast satirical apparatus of meta-science, the Borgesian wars of Solarist theory, the philosophical interrogation of the genre trope of alien contact.

But that's what *Solaris* does with those who try to probe and harness its power. With each return visit, it takes on more of the individual dreamer's imprint. An early draft of Soderbergh's screenplay, dated 4 October 2001, shows him still deeply in the spell of Tarkovsky, though evidently also fresh from a (probably first) reading of Lem's novel and the interview with the author on the 2001 DVD. At that stage the strongest character in the script was Sartorius (who was still Sartorius, male, and white); the visitors were still made out of neutrinos (very 1961, and already pretty Thoggish ten years on); Gibarian's video reinstated great slabs of Lem's metaphysical dialogue; and some seminal Tarkovsky moments were still in, including Rhey's smash through the cabin door and the famous final shot. It was an arty, obsessive, deeply uncommercial work with fairly ciphers characters, cryptic narrative connections, and (not unrelatedly) a lot more shagging.

The changes between the October draft and the shooting version a few weeks later are startling. Though the basic structure remains, the characters have been drastically overhauled and nearly all of the dialogue completely rewritten, with much of the restored Lem material cut again. The pivotal Sartorius character, whose hard rationalism was so central to Lem's original dialectic, has changed name, sex, race, and personality, while the role of the flaky theist has been transferred from Snow, whom it didn't fit at all, to the original Rhey, who it has to be admitted wears it rather better. Most strikingly, formerly oblique or nonexistent motivation has been systematically disambiguated and spelled out. There's an unmistakable whiff of influence here from Jim Cameron, who reportedly kept his distance as producer, but whose script notes seem nevertheless to have tightened the storytelling in some strikingly recognizable details: Gibarian's message and Kelvin's brief (featuring some very Cameronian new material about the *Solaris* project being taken over from NASA by a private company looking to exploit the planet as an energy source); a heightened sense of danger on arrival; and showing substituted for telling in a host of small details, including the new Soderbergh twist in the Snow plotline, and the



Previous page: Natasha McElhone plays Rheya in *Solaris*. Above: *Equilibrium* — Christian Bale and Taye Diggs
Below: *Treasure Planet* — The solar galleon, the RLS Legacy, soars through the Etherium escorted by a flock of Mantabirds. Opposite: *The Core* — set the controls for the heart of the, er, Earth

crucial closing sequence.

Nevertheless, what the *Solaris* experience has drawn out from Soderbergh's dreams is a brilliant studio player's most intensely personalized film since his debut. The terrestrial flashbacks, especially, are vintage Soderbergh, showing off not only his practised expertise at directing George Clooney charming his way to legover, but some scintillating use of his trademark techniques of scene overlay and soundtrack lapping. (Remember that the most famous scene in the Soderbergh canon, the makeout sequence from *Out of Sight*, was collaged by the director out of two originally-separate sequences in Scott Frank's script.) And though it seems farther than ever from Lem, by a curious turn Soderbergh's revisited ending has unwittingly come out identical to the one Lem himself imposed on a fellow genius in his essay on Dick's *Ubik*. If this new *Solaris* incarnation never quite packs the emotional kidney-punch of Tarkovsky's switched-on Bach sequences, it's still a defiantly intelligent and beautiful retelling of one of the most resonant works in the sf canon, and by several hyperspace jumps the best sf film of last year. No wonder nobody went to see it.

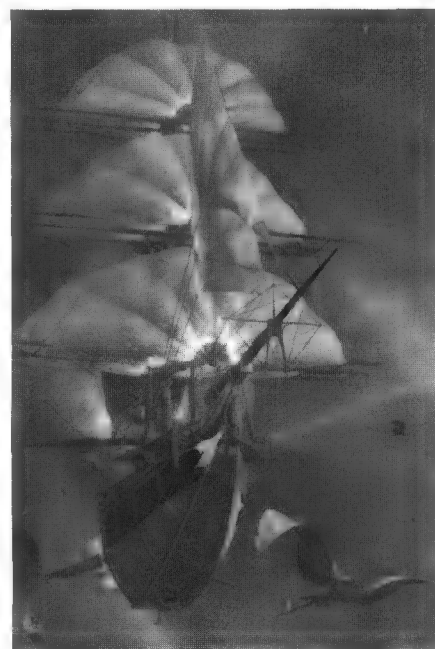
By a likeness so close as to seem almost coincidental, the other supernova-grade bomb of the season also concludes with a planet blowing up and everyone going home with the change. Like *Solaris*, Disney's *Treasure Planet* sets boldly out on a high-risk mission to determine by experiment the economic viability of an A-list myth for a new generation,

and goes through an intense process of development and transformation from which there emerges something weirdly magnificent but fatally non-viable back on Earth. But in contrast to *Solaris*' accelerated development in the hands of a single control-freak author, *Treasure Planet* suffered a famously overlong gestation as the pet project of the Disney in-house superteam of Musker and Clements, who've been clinging to the *Treasure* map since before their *Beauty and the Beast* changed the face of modern feature animation; and the agonies of a decade and more of rewrites are etched on the features of the finished script, with the decision over whether Silver is or isn't Jim's lost dad clearly revisited so often it's been worn entirely away. (CRASH CUT TO fly on wall over at New Line: "I'm still not getting why we can't have Gollum turn out to be Frodo's father.")

An extraordinarily beautiful film to look at, *Treasure Planet*'s visualization is often breathtaking, with some of the most eyepopping conceptual art and best-storyboarded set pieces in the studio's history. But the mainly cel-animated foreground characters lie flat and grey against these explosively colourful settings, like washed-out memories of an older and duller era. The most inexplicable miscalculation — and plainly the reason why *Treasure Planet* sank where the riskier *Atlantis* flew — is its lack of a princess heroine, presumably in the mysterious belief that the Emma Thompson character would somehow plug the void in what is otherwise a brave but grim attempt to make a Disney narrative about male adolescence.

For notwithstanding his septuply feminine middle name, James Pleiades Hawkins is Disney's first serious attempt to explain boys. Jim starts as an adorable wide-eyed Disney child, watching his dreams on the animated videobook under the bedclothes, only to turn into a sullen flop-haired Kevin when the body clock strikes 13. This being a parallel Disney universe where physical law is subordinate to visual and narrative desire, Jim's angst is sufficiently explained as the product not of hormones but merely of single parenting: "Ever since his father went away, Jim hasn't been the same. And you know how smart he is, but he's failing at school." Fortunately, because the laws of nature work a bit differently here and truth does the bidding of beauty, all Jim needs to rebuild his self-esteem and turn his winds skating delinquency into upright citizenry is distance from mom, a paternal role-model, and (erhem) a spell in the navy. It's all a valiant try, but it's hard to shake off a sense here that recent Disney animated features are starting to implode under the weight of their own ideological gravity, as they attempt to harness ever more wholesome narratives about self-esteem and family to ever purer forms of narrative energy in which all plot elements collapse into one. In *Treasure Planet*, the Map is the Key to the Mechanism that unlocks the Treasure and turns out to be the entire Planet which is also the Bomb and the Portal outta here. If only teenage XYs were as tidy.

Similar plot values, at least, obtain in John Amiel's enthusiastically ludicrous *The Core*. Essentially an inner-space remodelling of the 1990s asteroid movie, it retains the mission-



standard small team of handpicked heroes in a confined capsule struggling to deliver the nuke and get home, punctuating it all with command struggles back in Houston and second-unit sequences of tourist destinations worldwide experiencing a variety of digital apocalypse scenarios. Hilary Swank qualifies for mission command by virtue of being able to steer a crippled Shuttle to a safe landing in downtown LA (just like in real life, folks); and with inspired shamelessness, her deep-earth vehicle has been thoughtfully segmented into individually-disposable modules, which happen to correspond precisely with the numbers of (i) expendable cast members, (ii) nucular devices that have to be detonated in sequence, and (iii) second- and third-climaxes mandated in an early 21st-century action movie.

Burrowing deep down into the heart of the genre, with an ending that pointedly hommages Verne, it's in movie terms a remake of *Fantastic Voyage*, with Gaea as the patient and the cold-war politics updated for the new power-world of intra-Administrative turf wars between rival covert agencies. It's easy to chortle at the geophysical absurdities (Hero prof: "The core of the earth has stopped spinning!" Pentagon man, crossly: "How could this have happened?"), but that's a central part of its charm, as one insuperable scientific reality after another is handwaved away with the awesome grace of a fine martial art. ("Well, the good news is, the suits can take the pressure.") Propelled along by some of the most exhilarating logic-surfing in modern cinema, it delights in confronting its audience repeatedly with the sight of an enormous wall of common sense looming ahead, and just as it comes crashing down on top you somehow emerge riding safely on top of it as it breaks.

In a still bolder act of generic resurrection, Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* seeks to revive the humourless totalitarian dystopia movie for a 21st-century age-of-terror world, pitching us a chemically censored future in which the entire populace is saved from violence by being systematically prozacked into a state of emotionless non-aggression — albeit with an undisclosed side-effect that causes everyone to gel up their hair, dress like Gary Numan, and mooch around huge digital Nuremberg sets in a palette of greys and blacks. The most improbable thing about this overblown, portentous twaddle is that Christian Bale does genuinely brilliant work on his thankless role as the stony-faced lead masking turmoil within. But for a screenwriter's film (Wimmer's credits

include intermediate drafts on *Sphere* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*), it's amazingly badly-written, with shapeless and nonsensical plotting that asks us to believe in a police state which doesn't do any actual police work, and keeps its records not on databases but in enormous fat depository ledgers, even though it's somehow efficient enough to deliver timed drug doses several times a day to every single citizen. In our world, most people are quite adequately anaesthetized by things like employment and children; but I suppose that's beyond the insight of a Stalinist dictatorship that uses old-movie wiring diagrams to network its communications so that, yes, shooting out a TV screen blows up the transmitter.

Still, sometimes the movie visitors are so true to our memories that you start to wonder which dreamed it. Mark Steven Johnson's *Daredevil* is the most loving, fanboy recreation to date of a comics institution on film, a startlingly faithful cinematization of the young Frank Miller's career-making stint on Stan Lee's daftest creation. Among the single-handed achievements of Miller's brief but intense original run were the mercifully short-lived conviction that superhero comics could say something sensible about vigilantism as a social issue, and the introduction of martial arts to the underpinnings of superhero origin theory and combat graphics. For better or worse, the Marvel universe was never the same again, and *Daredevil* (whom I always rather liked in the pre-Frank days) never as good.

Johnson's film returns to the cast and plotline of Miller's seminal run, discreetly editing out the less happy features of Miller's rewrite of DD's origin narrative (such as The Man Called

Stick), and eliminating the darker side of Elektra's graphical career as professional supervillain babe. Otherwise, though, it faithfully reproduces Miller's engagingly cumbersome structure of evil, which sought to reconcile supervillain genre conventions with real-world organized crime ("One man running all the crime in New York City — I mean, that's a little far-fetched"), with the Kingpin hiring supervillains to take out DD and then having to take his jacket off and punch him out himself anyway.

It's all just like the dream, in fact. Set in that magical world in which it seems perfectly normal for your super-combatant girlfriend to attack you in your costumed identity because she thinks you killed her father, it's steeped in authentic Marvel angst — this is the first superhero movie in which both the hero and the star villain are Catholics — and DD's final voiceoverlogue is a classic audition piece for the would-be movie dialogue performer. "I had set out to save the city, but with Elektra's help I saved myself instead. Now I have faith; and sometimes, faith is all you need. I learned [please switch off post-9/11 beepers before proceeding:] that this is a city born of heroes. That one man can make a difference." If all this sounds a little too familiar, a little too much like a dialogue track dreamed together from a thousand and one half-remembered comics and videos, then drop your Higgs device, keep your hands where they can be seen, and turn around slowly. Gosh, is that Natalya Bondarchuk curled up on the sofa? Whose memory is this? What happened to reality? Ssh, ssh. We don't have to think like that any more. Everything we've done is forgiven. Everything.

Nick Lowe



ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Depressing publishing news is that Ben Jeapes's innovative small press Big Engine ran out of steam at the end of March. Rather than seek reinvestment, Ben decided to declare the company insolvent and focus on his own writing – which “has (a) been more enjoyable and (b) paid me more than Big Engine since I started in 2000.” This also means the suspension of Big Engine's magazine *3SF*, launched late last year. Alas...

THE PRODUCTIONS OF TIME

Paul Barnett resigned his art-editorial position with Paper Tiger in order to spend more time being John Grant and writing actual books.

Arthur C. Clarke couldn't resist responding to a query about Joycean influence on *2001*, in Roger Ebert's *Chicago Sun-Times* “Movie Answer Man” column (23 February): “Ashamed (?) to admit I've never read a word of Joyce – who I believe invented the useful name ‘quark’. Now involved with a much better Irish writer – Lord Dunsany has asked me to write intros to two of his g'father's books.”

David A. Hardy, famous sf and space artist, has now set his mark on the skies: “Just heard that an asteroid has been named after me. (13329) David-hardy = 1998 SB32... Discovered 20 September 1998 by Spacewatch at Kitt Peak. I was gobsmacked!” The astronomer responsible, Dr James Scotti, has similarly honoured Bob Eggleton and others.

Diana Wynne Jones was subjected to ruthless house style when attempting to promote her new *The Merlin Conspiracy*: “Publicity for this book seems to involve being photographed an unusual number of times – usually the same local photographer appearing with a different hat on and a different

book of rules. Did you know that the *Daily Mail* insists that all women have to be photographed in a skirt? And not in black. I had to buy a skirt.”

J.K. Rowling and Time Warner Bros won a legal action in Holland to prevent sales there of Dmitry Yemets's unsubtly imitative book *The Magic Double Bass*, featuring the character Tanya Grotter. This had sold half a million copies in Russia.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro received the 2003 World Horror Convention Grand Master Award.

Zoran Živković, the Serbian sf author (born 1948) who's a regular contributor to *Interzone*, is in fact not Zoran Živković the new Serbian Prime Minister (born 1960). Though they do both live in Belgrade.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Tiptree Award. This year's winners are M. John Harrison's novel *Light* and John Kessel's story “Stories for Men” (*Asimov's* Oct/Nov 2002).

As Others See Us. Sita Williams, producer of the sf series *The Last Train*, explained that despite featuring suspended animation and asteroid impact... “It's not science fiction, it's post-apocalyptic fiction.”

R.I.P. Sir Hardy Amies (1909-2003), the Queen's official dressmaker for 48 years, died on 5 March aged 93. The sf connection was his role as wardrobe designer for *2001: A Space Odyssey*. • **Howard Fast** (1915-2003), US author of such historical bestsellers as *Spartacus* (1951), who published much short sf and fantasy, died on 12 March; he was 88. • **Fred Freiberger** (1915-2003), US screenwriter and producer responsible for the second season of *Space: 1999*, died on 2 March aged 88. He also worked on *Star Trek*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *Superboy*, and *The Wild, Wild West*, and wrote screenplays for 13 feature films including *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953). • **Monica Hughes** (1925-2003), Liverpool-born writer of children's sf who lived in Canada since 1952 and won several literary awards, died on 7 March aged 77. Her best-known sf work is the Isis trilogy. • **Harry B. Warner Jr** (1922-2003), long-time fan, fanzine publisher, fan historian and indefatigable letter-writer, died on 17 February. He was 80. Harry's fanzines included the 1940s *Spaceways* and the long-running *Horizons*, published since 1939; his fan histories of the 1940s and 1950s were *All Our Yesterdays* (1969) and *A Wealth of Fable* (1976), whose 1992 expansion won a nonfiction Hugo. He also received 1969 and 1972 Hugos as best fan writer.

Oscars 2003. Fantasy was rewarded by the victory of Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* as Best Animated Feature, while *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* received the small consolation prize of wins for Achievement in Sound Editing and Best Visual Effects.

Thog's Translator Masterclass.

“...there is practically no radioactivity in the soil of this part of the galaxy.” (Stanislaw Lem, *The Invincible*, 1976 Penguin UK translation)

Rights or Wrongs? James Follett published an incandescent release about BBC7 digital radio repeats of his 1981-82 sf radio series *Earthsearch*. These were “authorized” by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society, which collects fiddly sums like blanket fees for academic textbook photocopying and distributes the take to authors. Never having had anything to do with ALCS, Follett and his agent were stunned to discover that his work had been licensed by them without his knowledge at a bargain £10 per broadcast hour (rather than £450 per episode plus 50% for transmitting them twice a day, as in his original BBC contract). “Imagine waking up one morning to discover that an estate agent that you had not appointed had put your house on the market without telling you and, furthermore, was selling for 2 per cent of its 1980 value!” Comment is awaited from the Society of Authors.

Sapient Pearwood. A Pratchettian moment from a press release on safety testing: “In one test, the luggage itself broke into the passenger compartment, potentially threatening other occupants.”

Filmwatch. Described to me as the week's gloomiest fantasy movie news is the *Variety* report that John Travolta is likely to star in a new remake of *Harvey* (1950). In this version, presumably, the six-foot-three rabbit is invisible to others because he's completely Clear.

Thog's Masterclass. Physics Dept. “...no, affinity wasn't quite the right word, it felt more like they were two north poles of a bipolar magnet, each vigorously, automatically repelled by the other.” (Jo Clayton, *Blue Magic*, 1988) • *Dept of Anatomy.* “Ace crept back down the corridor, her heart pounding in her neck. She swallowed, trying to push it away, concentrate on what she was doing, but it wouldn't shift.” (Dale Smith, *Dr Who-Heritage*, 2002) • *Dept of Genealogy.* “Lord Voldemort – who is the last remaining ancestor of Salazar Slytherin...” (J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 1998) • *Classics Dept.* “We are between the wild throat of certainty and the mad zitidar of fact – we can escape neither.” (Edgar Rice Burroughs, *The Gods of Mars*, 1918)

THE DEAD COME FROM THE SEA, AT NIGHT. Of course no one ever witnesses their arrival, since it has been the immemorial custom of our town, particularly on those nights of all nights, that everyone is snug in their bed, behind bolted doors and locked shutters. We know, not by any calendrical calculation, but merely by a feeling in the air, by an unbidden pause in rhythm of life itself, that such an advent is upon us. Then we wait, in silence, in the darkness, and, in silence and darkness, the dead arrive. We find them in the morning, on the docks, piled in great heaps like a catch of fish.

That is when I am called upon in my official capacity. On such mornings, it is my duty to arrive at the water's edge first, just at dawn, when I can still observe the black silhouettes of the ships which have delivered the dead to us, anchored offshore, visible in the thinning fog.

This particular morning, I discern two tramp freighters. In ancient, mildewed paintings in the town hall, you can behold a similar scene, rendered in shades of grey, showing tall-masted ships with half-furled sails like stagnant clouds. I have no memory of ships like that, and I never asked my father about them, nor, I suspect, did he ever ask his. Thus are we left free of any disturbing hint of change; for, indeed, nothing changes in our town, save that the number of the dead who reside among us slowly increases beyond counting.

In the dim, cold morning, I stand on the dock in my black coat with its pewter buttons, in my damp-stained bicorn hat which I inherited from my father (and he from his). As an official of the unseen government, I must preside, as the townspeople slowly emerge from their houses and process down to the docks, the looks on their faces as blank as those of the corpses. In fancy, once, I thought, *they are like condemned prisoners on the way to execution*, but, no, it was never like that, nor are they like hopeless slaves in a salt-mine. (I must have gotten these images from reading.) The better analogy is to the carved figures that move before the face of the great clock before the Town Hall: the reaper, the sower, the man with the shovel, the coachman driving his hearse. All these, unthinking, without volition, go about their business, complete their rounds, and so the cycle continues.

It is hardly necessary for me to do anything, that morning or any other. More for the comfort than anything else, for the sense that I am, as a representative of the unseen government, *capable* of giving direction, I walk among the crowds and heaps of corpses, pointing with my cane (which was my father's, and my father's father's) as if to say, without words, *You, take that one*.

One by one, the corpses are hauled away by the townspeople, who will carry them into their homes, set them up in positions of familiarity or comfort, accepting the dead as our guests and neighbours. Strong men sometimes heft one or two on their shoulders. You can see family groups with wheelbarrows or small wagons, piling up a load. This morning an old beggar woman, ragged, barefoot, soon to be a corpse

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL Dead Woman IN THE WORLD

Darrell Scheitzer

herself, I suspect, grabs a dead child by the wrists and drags it off. She weeps softly, from unimaginable dreams or longings or simply from senility, I cannot know. But even this is part of the larger, inscrutable pattern of our existence, and I do not interfere.

And so it is, mere routine, until, as the corpses are uncovered, layer upon layer – *earthquake! cataclysm!* She is revealed: the body of a young woman (so far as I am able to estimate age), whose face and features are, despite her sodden condition, *exquisite*, like some perfect marble statue, almost translucent from a sunrise gleaming behind it. (Not something I had ever seen, or even dreamed; again, perhaps, imagery from some crumbling book perused in the town library during my off-duty hours.)

This is the beginning of my transgression, the mere sight of her, the *fascination*.

Hoping no one will notice, I pull her out of the heap, then stand with my feet on either side of her, as if I hope to hide her under my long coat, pretending she isn't there. With increased determination, I flick my cane this way and that, imposing the power of the unseen government to maintain the smooth flow of things. The process is concluded; the clockwork figures complete their rounds; and I stand alone, astride my beauty, on the deserted dock.

Now the sun has risen, as bright as it ever gets in our town. The fog is not quite dispelled, the sky still grey, but there is an increased light, and the black silhouettes of the freighters across the water have vanished.

Alone, then, I take up my prize in my arms, as if she were a living child. She weighs almost nothing. I am amazed by that, as I am at the beauty of her face and the perfection of her hands and feet (which are bare and muddy; she wears only a tattered white gown). I am frightened at the way my heart races so, out of fear, out of dread of detection, yes, but more so out of the terror of the discovery of *myself*, as if, from a dream, with this beautiful one in my arms, I have awakened into some wholly new and different reality.

The touch of her is neither warm nor cold. I feel almost no sensation as I carry her, save her wet hair touching my cheek, shifting slightly as I walk.

Alone, then, for the townspeople have gone back to their homes to find places for the new arrivals, I make my way up the main street of our town, past the confectioner's shop, where the undecaying dead are set in the bay window, around a little table, as if enjoying cakes and candies; past the shoemaker's, where an old, white-bearded man sits in a chair above the door, held in place by ropes, his feet dangling down to display the finest quality boots.

Others of the dead line benches, or sit in doorways. Some lie in heaps in the alleys, supposedly sleeping, but, disgraceful though it may seem, more like discarded trash. I know I should do something about that, deliver official complaints to certain persons, but I never have, and doubt I ever shall.

If there have ever been more zealous officials in our town, I do not know of them, nor did my father speak

of any to me, or his father to him.

With my beautiful dead one in my arms, I arrive, then, unchallenged, at my own dwelling, which is in a loft, reached by a winding exterior staircase, in the back of the Town Hall adjoining the clock tower. I ascend, drawing very near to the wooden figures of the town clock, which are nearly life-sized, but old and worn, their paint chipping off. (They rest in coffin-like niches when the mechanism has not called them up before the clock face to perform their circumambulations.) A pigeon roosts on the hearse-driver's upraised whip-hand.

I heft my beloved onto my shoulder until I can get my keys out, then fumble my way within. I set her down on the bed, then open the shutters to let the dim daylight in. A dozen dead faces stare at me from out of the shadows, my own company of guests, often those left behind on the docks when everyone else is gone. I have accumulated several old men and women, and a rather startling trio of little children, two boys and a girl, all with their throats cut. The dead crowd my shelves, occupy all my chairs, sit slumped in my corners.

I prop the new arrival up with pillows (all the while wondering where I am going to sleep from now on). I wrap her in my best sitting-robe, bathe and dry her poor feet and put socks on them, this deference intended to say to the others who share our quarters, *Look, this one is special. She is to be your queen.*

Which course is the continuation of my transgression, an actual crime now, for the ideology of our unseen government demands perfect equality among the living and the dead. We may have no queens here, any more than we may have a town official who claims one particular corpse for himself, guards it as jealously as a dog guards a bone, and so subverts the entire process whereby the dead come to rest in the *correct* place for each one of them.

Where this girl actually belongs, now, we shall probably never know.

But the mania is upon me and will not be denied. She is *mine*. My heart goes out to her, as if I could somehow return her to life, and she could indeed be my queen. I saw some discarded holiday decorations in the mud at the foot of the stairs. I run back down, snatch up some bright metal and streaming tinsel, then fashion them into a crown, which I place, with all reverence, upon my queen's head. I speak to her in tones I never use toward any of my other guests – to whom I am polite, as duty requires, but nothing more – and, leaning forward to whisper in her perfectly-formed ear, pretending that I do so to prevent the other dead from eavesdropping, *I tell her that I love her.*

Have I completely lost my mind, all sense of propriety, any shred or remnant of social conscience?

Most likely it is so.

Even I am overwhelmed by the enormity of what I have done, and so I button up my great black coat again, place my hat on my head, and, with cane in hand, make my way down the stairs and into the street once more, where I spend the rest of the day going about my rounds, chatting amiably with the townspeople, observing how

people go about their various duties. Mr K___ sweeps his doorstep at a precise hour and minute, as he always does, whether there is anything to be swept from it or not. J___, the taxi-man, bawls out an absurd song as he wheels corpses about in his pedicab, sometimes pausing to point out this or that architectural feature or significant spot, as if he is a tour-guide.

The dead fill the shops, the restaurants, the library, the waiting room in the train station where the train never comes and only the dead have the patience to wait for it. (Once there was laughter in our town and this was seen as a joke. But I have heard no laughter, nor has my father described any to me, nor did his father speak of any to him.)

Mrs Z___ complains that the children in the tiny school have to squirm sideways through masses of poorly placed, shabbily maintained dead to make their way into the schoolroom, where the students and teacher have to stand because all the desks are filled by corpses. I promise to investigate, and take my leave of Mrs Z___. But, when the teacher sees me looking in through the window, she simply waves, and the children, listlessly, raise their hands.

All is as it has always been, as our unseen government requires, and so, without incident, I complete my rounds.

The town clock chimes the hour before curfew.

Somehow the day has passed. I don't remember most of it. I must have stopped for lunch somewhere along the way, probably at the usual tavern, operated by the redoubtable V___, where a corpse hangs in the place of a swinging sign, with bells tied around his ankles, jingling forlornly in the occasional breeze.

The day has passed unnoticed, I say, because my mind has been filled with passionate contemplation of what I have done, with *expectation* which rises to a point of frenzy. I am terrified for myself and of myself. I start in fright when I glance at my own visage in a store-front mirror. If such a person could be walking through the streets of our town, garbed in the uniform of the highest authority... then I cannot even complete the thought, save to grope blindly toward the concept that existence is a meaningless horror which *provides no security* for either the living or the dead, if such undetected moral corruption is possible.

Yet at the same time I tell myself that my love for my queen is something new and wonderful, something beautiful, like an infusion of impossible *colour* into our fog-bound existence, which is absurd, as if I were still young and capable of romantic feelings!

And yet I *am*! To compound my offences, I snatch the entire wares of a dead flower-seller out of her dead hands, leaving no payment behind in her cup, and furtively I scuttle back up my stairs, past the disapproving, peeling faces of the clock-tower figures. Once more I fumble with my keys. My hands are cold. The damp evening air oppresses me. My teeth chatter.

Secretly then, ever so *secretly*, I make my way inside, confident in the discretion of my other house-guests, and I strew the flowers across the bed in wild

abandon, and then I fall to my knees and *worship* before this altar of absolute beauty! I spill out to my beloved all my longings, the story of my whole life, gushing about how when I was young I once dreamed of a place of green grass and sunlight, away from the dead. In grotesque profanation of the trust placed in me by the unseen government, I have allowed such thoughts, dreams, or pseudo-memories to grow within me like a luminous cancer, rather than trying to purge myself through my work, as any responsible and moral person would at least try to do.

Dare I describe what follows? *I kiss her hand*, weeping, and eventually fall asleep on my knees, holding her hand in mine.

II

The Complete Confession of the Disgraced Official, whose name has been expunged from all Town records:

The miracle, I swear, was *not* a dream. It was far, far more than a dream.

I awoke in the timeless darkness of the night, and *felt her soft hands caressing the sides of my head*.

I beheld her face, as marble-pale as she had always been, but now positively *luminous*, as if the full, unshrouded Moon shone from within her. She returned my gaze. Our eyes met, locked, and our souls mingled together forever. She smiled gently.

Then she whispered my name, my full name, not just the letter of designation by which I am addressed in our town. Only a mother could know that, or a lover. I suppose I had whispered it to her, amidst my prior, frenzied discourse, which only confirmed my suspicion that she was, miraculously, *neither dead nor alive*, but in a different, transcendent state. She could hear me as the dead cannot. She remembered, as the dead do not. She spoke in a voice like sweetest music.

Yet the touch of her hand was not cold, like that of a corpse, nor warm, like that of a living person.

It was almost as if she were not there at all.

But *no*! I will never accept that! Not a dream. Not an hallucination. She was a *sending* from some power infinitely greater than even our hidden government, from some place beyond the fog from which the ships come, which no one in our town has ever imagined.

I bade her get up, and she got up, and we walked out of the room together. She took my hand in hers and we whirled, we *danced* to unheard music on the little landing at the top of the stairs, where the wooden clock-tower figures glared at us disapprovingly.

With flowers in her hair the crown on her head and her white gown trailing behind her, she raced through the streets, and called after me to follow, laughing. And laughing, I followed. At the establishment of the redoubtable V___, I unlocked the door, for as a minister of the unseen government I possessed the universal key to all locks in our town. Inside, we broke out the finest wine and toasted one another. I cranked up the player-piano, and then we two danced to *real* music, in

the glare of candlelight, for we two had, laughing, lit every candle in the place, placing some of them in the hands, or even, mockingly, in puddles of melted wax, on the heads of the numerous dead who lined the walls and filled most of the booths and chairs of V___'s establishment.

And when V___ came downstairs, wide-eyed, in his nightgown, to discover what all the racket was, we only laughed again and called on him to join the party. We seized him by either hand, and dragged him around and around, calling on him to *dance* as if there is no tomorrow, and he danced, or lurched and shambled, to describe it more accurately, at least until he managed to break away and scramble upstairs again, wailing in terror.

What more? Yes, there was more.

We rang doorbells. We summoned the respectable citizens into the streets at a most improper hour, and we called on them to liberate themselves, to dance, to sing, to make noises, to behave shockingly.

For a time it seemed, they would. The revolution seemed to have taken hold. Out with the old, the stagnant, the ridiculously cheerless, in with the cheerfully ridiculous!

Children in particular were willing... to do whatever was to be done, whatever they could imagine. One small boy even *knocked the hat off* a corpse posed in a window!

And – still *more*. We two ascended the clock-tower and caused the bell to ring *at the wrong time*. Unscheduled, violated, the wooden figures rose from their coffins and went through their gyrations on the little balcony before the clock-face, while the two of us, with awesome acrobatic skill, joined them in their dance, switching their removable, wooden hats around and even wearing them ourselves, making a mockery of it all.

Then, with some degree of solemnity, before the assembled multitude, from atop the clock-tower, in a strident, inspiring oration, my amazing companion called on the people to rid themselves of their *most precious possession*, which is their fear. She pleaded with them to have the courage to smash it, like an ugly glass thing.

At last, we two retired to my quarters behind the Town Hall, and *naked*, I climbed into bed with her, and we made passionate love. Afterwards, she told me of a strange country I can almost recall in my memory, where the sun rises in the morning, unshrouded, where the sky is often blue, where the living are alive and the dead in the ground, and there are lands to live in beyond the boundaries of a little, fog-shrouded seaport town.

She explained that if I tried very hard, if I cast off my own fear and *dreamed* it, I could *awaken* into that world.

"Do it," she said. "For me."

"I have never felt alive before now," I replied.

"Nor have I," she said.

And so we slept in one another's arms until late in the morning, and we dreamed that we had indeed awakened into the other, brighter world.

So it is concluded, and sealed away in the Secret Archives of the Town, never to be gazed upon by any person, save those of exceptional moral fortitude, with the express permission of the unseen government.

III

But then the clock-bell thunders, and the whole room shakes with it. I hear the mutter of voices outside, and the tread of many feet on the stairway outside.

Instantly I sit up, and comprehend my doom. A *full understanding* of my folly comes to me in a flash.

To *think* that the dull clods in our town were *capable* of sharing what I have discovered – *that* is madness! To *presume* that the others possess the sufficiently *exquisite sensibility* to appreciate love, or the courage to cast away fear – for *that* I deserve everything that is to befall me. Thus existence cleanses itself!

In an instant, the door crashes open and the redoubtable V___ enters, accompanied by many others. He snatches up and dons the pewter-buttoned coat and the bicorn hat (which used to be my father's), and *he* gesticulates wildly with my cane, wordlessly directing the townspeople to drag me naked out of bed, to haul me down the stairs and through the chill, damp streets in the early morning fog, to hold me fast before the tribunal of substantial citizens (including the redoubtable V___, the punctual Mr K___, J___ the taximan, Mrs Z___, and the schoolteacher), where I am to be condemned *without words*, because my crimes are truly and literally *unspeakable*.

I turn once, to look after my lover, but she is only lying in the bed where I left her, naked, limp, her skin as exquisite as near-translucent marble.

IV

What more can I say? I did not dream it.

I could not understand, save to appreciate that I, too, had failed to cast aside my most precious possession, for I was very much afraid, in the fog-bound morning of a day, which, by the subtle pause in the rhythm of life, everyone in our town knew had arrived.

Naked, I lay on the docks, bound hand and foot, humiliated in every possible manner, my head shaven and covered with grey mud, ridiculous designs traced all over my body, to await the arrival of the dead, and those who deliver them, who would know what to do with me.

Darrell Schweitzer's most recent stories here were "The Fire Eggs" (issue 153), "Envy, the Gardens of Ynath, and the Sin of Cain" (issue 178) and "The Runners in the Maze" (issue 186). A resident of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he has written many books – novels, short-story collections, poetry and non-fiction.

Old Maps of Hell:

On Re-Reading Kingsley Amis's *New Maps of Hell*

Ian R. MacLeod

I first came across *New Maps of Hell* by Kingsley Amis in 1969 as a 13-year-old on a summer holiday with my parents on Guernsey. Bookshops didn't really seem to exist then as they do now (at least for a suburban child like me) and I found it, as I found most paperbacks then, on a sunny carousel outside a newsagent's shop amid the Harold Robbins and Alistair MacLeans. I didn't realize that it was a work of criticism rather than fiction, but the cover said "Science Fiction" and bore an arresting scene of a flying saucer landing on an abandoned desert airstrip, and that, after all the usual change-counting and soul-searching, was enough for me. I remember being a little surprised when I read the book, but nevertheless enjoying it. It seemed to be full of interesting plot summaries which I could pinch for my own early attempts at writing, and strong arguments as to why sf should be taken seriously, which was then something that only myself and a couple of like-minded schoolmates seemed prepared to do.

For me, 1969 was a golden time for reading. My copy of *A for Andromeda* by Fred Hoyle and John Elliot, which I also found on a carousel in Guernsey (this one a beach shop) still has sand between its pages. Then there was Clarke's *A Fall of Moondust*... Books, the places I bought them, the money I saved from walking home from school instead of taking the bus, the creases I

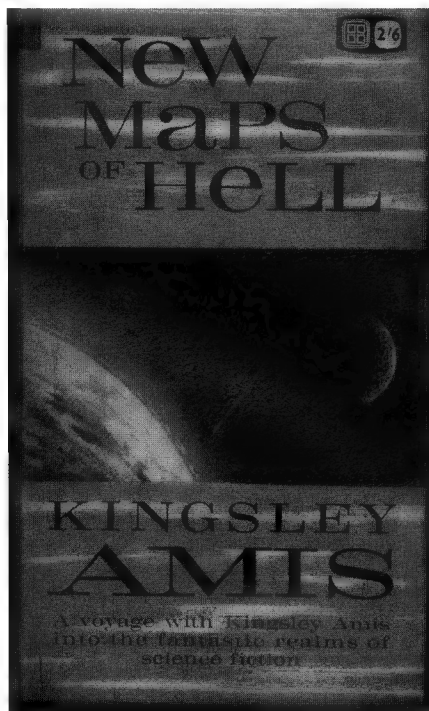
desperately tried to avoid giving them, the many I borrowed from the library and surreptitiously annotated inside the back cover, were alive to me then in a way that they aren't now. I guess it's all about being 13. Still, I can't claim that *New Maps of Hell* made a particularly enormous impact on me, but its existence (and my subsequently finding out that Kingsley

Amis was a Proper Writer People Had Heard Of) rather proved a point. sf wasn't just the trashy rubbish most people claimed it was. So I was surprised when, a few months later, I read this description of *NMOH*, in Judith Merrill's *The Best of SF 5*:

"... a recent volume of considerable arrogance, ill-considered opinion and uncon sidering slovenliness of research..."

with a fair amount more on the same lines. So, who was right? And why should it matter now?

NMOH was published in 1960, as was Merrill's reaction, although I only picked both books up at the end of that decade. Already, Amis was writing about a lost age. Re-reading *NMOH* now, I can certainly appreciate why Judith Merrill found it so offensive. Amis's tone in *NMOH* is consistently patronizing. He seems to imagine throughout that he is addressing the Intelligent Reader who, by definition (at least Amis's definition) will not have read any sf, nor have the faintest understanding of it. He spends a great deal of time reassuring his imagined audience that they have nothing to fear from sf, that the maidens displayed on the covers of the magazines are only rarely actually engulfed by the monsters embracing them on the cover, and then not usually in any sexual way, and that



scenes of violence and horror belong almost entirely to sf's sister genre of fantasy (which Amis abhors, although he plainly has read little of it). Even the writers he likes, such as Pohl, Sheekley and Kuttner, he tends to praise so faintly that I ended up wondering just how much sf Amis had not only read, but also enjoyed. And as for the ones he doesn't – well, Mervyn Peake is "a bad fantasy writer of maverick status" and the well-established and undeniably excellent Jack Finny is (much to Merrill's annoyance) a nameless author "who has yet to make his name."

But all in all, *NMOH* remains fun to read. And Amis, being Amis, seems to take far more pleasure in his examples illustrating the things which are wrong with sf than those by which he attempts attempt to prove the genre's nascent literary status. "I'm an associate professor at the university," explains the tall, handsome stranger the busty Holly Kendal meets shortly after having been menaced, in her abbreviated shorts and light cotton sweater, by a giant ant, in "Legacy of Terror" from the November 1958 issue of *Amazing Stories*. "English Lit's my racket, but I got me a degree in entomology, too. So when I picked up reports of king-sized spiders and stuff in the vicinity..." Lovely stuff. You can well imagine Amis and Philip Larkin upsetting their staid literary chums at the Garrick by chortling over luridly-covered copies of their oh-so-naughty sf magazines. No wonder Judith Merrill took exception, although, like most things, time and distance have lent *NMOH* a different perspective.

Amis compares sf to jazz, as another "popular" genre with some intellectual merit which he claims to admire (again, he's far better at being barbed than he is at being enthusiastic). And, tellingly, he comments that "among people of undergraduate age, I gather, a liking of science fiction raises hardly more eyebrows than acquiescence in the fact of Melville or Faulkner." In other words, sf was starting to become cool. And, even more interestingly, he concluded *NMOH* by describing sf as being on the lip of bringing into existence "a writer of real standing."

He wasn't wrong. Just ahead lay Aldiss, Ballard, Delany, Ellison and all the rest. Amis was still a youngish man when he wrote *NMOH*, and he must have felt a certain I-told-you-so satisfaction to witness this sea-change. He certainly remained a friend and supporter of the genre throughout his life, but I do rather wonder if he didn't rather regret losing the monster-engulfed maidens. At the core of *NMOH* is a sense that sf can and should never be "proper fiction." Amis certainly expresses pious

hopes in that direction; that, for example, there will be less "hieratic self-importance" amongst its practitioners – surely a case, if ever there was one, of the pot calling the kettle black. But he can't quite raise the same enthusiasm for the idea of young writers springing up who will get rid of "the cliquish jargon" than he summons for the subsequent gleeful list of the foibles of the "cranks who seem intent on giving sf a bad name" (including, amongst others, for those of you who are interested, John W. Campbell, A.E. van Vogt and L. Ron Hubbard). Although he was too wise and canny a critic to just come right out and admit it, I suspect that in his heart Amis liked his sf down and dirty and disreputable. And why not? And who cares? After all, sf has changed beyond all recognition. Or has it?

Yes, I would argue, but also no. For example, Amis acknowledges that many sf novels are over-padded and less satisfactory than the short stories which often spawn them. He also points out that genre writers are expected to produce far too many books much too quickly if they are to be remotely commercially successful. Then, whilst he doesn't complain about the lack of proper characterization in sf, he simply accepts it as an inherent limitation. He also takes it as read that the prose of even the best sf authors cannot be compared with that of the better mainstream fiction writers. Similarly, he cites writers like Golding and Updike as authors prepared to mix some sf elements into some of their work, but shows no real desire to see any genuine crossover. Amis, as I have said, *likes* his sf to be in its ghetto of lurid covers and dodgy adverts for X-ray specs, where he can dip into it when he's in the mood without too many unwanted distractions or surprises. Although he argues with some cogency that sf can cast some arresting light on the real world, he doesn't want serious intellectual argument out of it. Least of all does he expect the main readership of sf to have any real familiarity with literature outside the genre, or for readers outside it to care much about what's going on within. If he did, *NMOH* would have been an even bigger and more pompous irrelevance than Judith Merrill suggested. For Amis, sf, above all, is a special, different pleasure, almost an addiction, which hooks those readers who love it – who are predominantly male and technically inclined – in adolescence, or not at all.

I don't intend to argue that the differences between modern sf and the writers of what is now often called the Golden Age aren't enormous. But I am prepared to bet that most frequent

readers of sf will have found themselves justifying the genre against similar criticisms to those I've listed in the previous paragraph far more recently than 1960. The elements which Amis identifies: guilty pleasure; the separateness; the poor public perception; a perceived weakness in terms of style, characterization and serious argument, all still continue to haunt sf. When Amis wrote *NMOH*, the genre wasn't cool, although, under the brief guise of "speculative fiction" it was about to become so. But then sf (at least the written kind) isn't cool now, either. The covers these days might be less lurid, and the magazines which were then its staple have now become its conscience and avant-garde, but sf, at least in written form, is still about as far from general acceptance as it ever was. True, it now receives proper study, and there are specialist critical journals. But look beyond them and you'll search long and hard for any serious discussion. People outside the genre (in itself a telling phrase) who should know far better (writers and publishing professionals included) dismiss written sf without every having really read any of it. And for those inside the genre – well, even now, you can still assume that the core audience consists of people who don't read much else. It's as if, despite it being clear that sf has demonstrably progressed much further as a genre in the 40 years since *NMOH* than so-called mainstream fiction has, there's some pole-to-pole repulsion which somehow keeps the books and the readerships apart.

Even the most occasional reader of decent modern sf will understand that the genre is much, much bigger in scope, ambition and genuine literary talent than the common perception of the genre which still remains. But, just like Kingsley Amis, maybe us more avid readers do still like sf's reading-by-torchlight-under-the-blankets element of guilty pleasure, and those damsel-engulfing aliens, and the sense of pure escape, far more than we'd ever be prepared to admit. If sf ever does become cool again and expand outside the tight confines of its genre, we will have to be prepared to share that guilty pleasure with a wider audience, and probably face losing it in the process.

Ian R. MacLeod

Editor's note: Ian R. MacLeod's new novel (and his first to be published in Britain), *The Light Ages* – set in an England where the Industrial Revolution is powered by magic – is due out from Simon & Schuster/Earthlight in June 2003.

THE WATERS OF Meribah

Tony Ballantyne

A pair of feet stood on the table, just waiting to be put on. Greyish-green feet, webbed like ducks; they looked a little like a pair of diver's flippers, only alive. Very, very alive.

"We thought we'd start with the feet as you can wear them underneath your clothes while you get used to them. It's probably best that no one suspects what you are – to begin with, anyway."

"Good idea," said Buddy Joe, looking over the head of the rotund Doctor Flynn at the feet. Alien feet. A faint mist hung around them, alien sweat exuding from alien pores.

Doctor Flynn held out an arm to stop Buddy Joe from reaching for the feet and putting them on right away.

"Slow down, Buddy Joe. I have to ask, for the record. Are you sure that you want to put the feet on? You know there will be no taking them off once you have done so."

"Yes, I want to put them on," said Buddy Joe, eyeing the feet.

"You know that once they are attached they will be part of you? If your body rejects them, it will be rejecting its own feet? Or worse, they may stay attached but the interface may malfunction, leaving you in constant pain?"

"I know that."

"And yet you still want to go ahead?"

"Of course. I've been pumped full of Compliance as a

part of my sentence. I have no choice but to do what you tell me."

"Oh, I know that. I just need to hear you say it for the record."

Doctor Flynn moved out of the way. Buddy Joe was free to pick up the feet and carry them across the room to a chair. There he sat down, kicked off his shoes and socks and pulled them on.

It was like pushing his naked human feet into a pair of rubber gloves. He struggled, twisted and wriggled them into position. The alien feet did not want him; they were fighting back, trying to spit him out. Somewhere deep inside his brain he could feel himself screaming. His hands were burning, soaked in the acidic sweat that oozed from the pores of the alien feet. His own feet were being amputated, dissolved by the first stage of the alien body that Doctor Flynn and his team were making him put on. Buddy Joe was feeling excruciating pain, but the little crystal of Compliance that was slowly dissolving into his bloodstream kept him smiling all the while.

And then, all of a sudden, the feet slipped into place and they became part of him.

"That's it!" called one of Doctor Flynn's team. She looked up from her console and nodded at a nurse. "You can remove the sensors now."

She peeled the sticky strips away from his skin and dropped them in the disposal chute.

"A perfect take. We've done it, team."

Doctor Flynn was shaking hands with the other people in the room. People were looking at consoles, at the feet, at each other, in every direction but at Buddy Joe. Buddy Joe just stood there, smiling down at his strange new feet, wondering at the strange new sensations he was feeling. The floor felt different through them. Too dry and brittle.

Doctor Flynn came over, a grin spreading over his round, shiny face. "Okay, we'd like you to walk across the room. Can you do that?"

He could do that. Dip your feet into a pool of water and see how refraction bends them out of shape. That's how the feet felt to Buddy Joe. At an angle to the rest of his body; but part of him. Still part of him.

He took a step forward with his left leg, and the left foot narrowed as he raised it. As it descended it flared out to its full webbed glory, flattened itself out and felt for the texture of the plasticized floor. It recoiled. The floor was too dry, too brittle. A good gush of acid would melt it to nothing. He moved his right foot, and then he flapped and squelched his way across the floor.

"No problems walking?" said Doctor Flynn.

"No," he replied, but the Doctor hadn't been talking to him.

There was a final checking of consoles. One by one the assembled doctors and nurses and technicians gave a thumbs up.

"Okay," said Doctor Flynn. "Well, thank you Buddy Joe. You can put your shoes on now. They should still fit if you roll the joints of the feet over each other, and in that way you can conceal them. We'll see you again the same time next week."

"Hey, just a minute," said Buddy Joe. "You can't send me out there with the Compliance still active."

Doctor Flynn gave a shrug. "We can't keep you in here. Laboratory space costs money. We're out of here ourselves in five minutes time to make way for yet another group of Historical Astronomers. Goodbye."

And that was it. He had no choice but to slip on his shoes and to walk out of the laboratory onto the fifth-level deck.

Buddy Joe made his way to a lift that would take him down to the Second Deck. The Fifth Deck was quite empty at this time of night. With any luck, he would make it home without being recognized as someone under the spell of Compliance.

His feet were rolled up in his plastic shoes and socks, it took all his self-control to hold in the exhalation of acid that would melt them away and allow his feet to flap free. Don't let go, Buddy Joe. The metal grid of the deck will feel horrible against your poor feet.

The laboratory lay a long way out from the Pillar Towers. He could see through the mesh of the floor, all the way down to the waves crashing on the garbage-strewn shoreline far below. Looking up, he could see the flattened-out stars that pressed close, smearing themselves just above the tops of the highest buildings. He would have liked to stop for a while, it was a rare treat to look

at the remnants of the universe, but he didn't dare. Not with Compliance still inside him.

The few Fifth Deckers who were out walking ignored him as usual. Scientists or lawyers, who could tell the difference? All wrapped up against the winter cold, trousers tucked into their socks against the cold gusts of wind that blew up through the metal decking. Buddy Joe kept to the shadows, dodging between the cats' cradles of struts that braced the buildings to the decks. Approaching the Pillar Tower he saw the yellow light that bathed the polished wooden doors of the main lift and he relaxed, but too soon. The woman who had been following him called out from the shadows behind.

"Stop there."

He did so.

"You're on Compliance, right?"

"Yes."

Buddy Joe felt a pathetic cry building inside. First they had taken his feet, now they would take his wallet, or worse.

"What did you do?"

"Rape," he said, "But..."

"I don't want to hear the details."

Buddy Joe dutifully closed his mouth, panic rising inside. His shoes were melting.

"Some bastard raped my partner only two months ago. Caught him alone in a lift coming up from the Second Deck. Are you a Second Decker?"

"Yes, but..."

"I'm not interested. How about if I told you to throw yourself off the edge?"

"Please don't do that."

"Funny, that. John said 'Please' too. Bastard didn't listen to him."

Buddy Joe clenched his fists together. His new feet were flapping open and closed by themselves, trying to creep away from the woman. There was a gentle intake of breath. This was it. This was the end. She would tell him to go and jump off the deck and he would have no choice but to obey. She was going to say it. She was going to...

And then nothing. A lengthening pause.

He turned around: the woman had gone. In her place was the stuff of nightmares. Buddy Joe began to make a noise. A thin scream of pure terror.

He was looking at another alien. He was looking at himself. It had his feet. It was his height, its hands stretched out... No. Don't look at the hands, Buddy Joe. But worse than that.

It had no head.

No head, but it was watching him. It was trying to say something to him, but he wasn't ready to understand.

—Forget it, then, said the alien. —For now.

It rose up into the air and vanished.

Two minutes later, Buddy Joe walked, shaking, into the lift.

He had Compliantly forgotten all about the alien.

Buddy Joe's flat was at the top of a block built on the Second Deck, home of those just bright enough not to believe

in anything, but not bright enough to believe in something. His window looked out into the gloom cast by the underside of the Third Deck. He had a bed, a food spigot and a viewscreen. Down the corridor were a bathroom and a row of toilet cubicles. Buddy Joe's father lived two flats down, his sister in the next flat again. Buddy Joe's grandfather had lived in the flat just next to the lift shaft. That flat had echoed and boomed every time the lift had moved. It echoed and boomed all day long, and most of the night. Buddy Joe's Granddad was dead now, though, and a new family had moved in. Granddad would have called them an Indian family, but he was old-fashioned in that respect. He had been old enough to remember when flowers had first bloomed on the moon.

"What do you know, Buddy Joe?" asked the woman on the viewscreen.

"I don't know nothing," said Buddy Joe.

"Next dose of Compliance at 40 P tomorrow. Next part of the alien suit at 60 P."

Buddy Joe rolled over on his bed. He was seriously thinking of throwing himself off the edge of the deck.

The viewscreen flickered and his sister appeared. She was sitting on a bed in a grey metal room just the same as his, just three doors away.

"Forty P tomorrow, eh, Buddy Joe?"

"That's right."

"And the next part of the alien suit at 60 P."

"That's what they said."

His father appeared on the screen. It might as well be the same room, the same bed, only the person changed.

"Forty P, Buddy Joe."

"Yes."

"New suit at 60 P."

"That's what they said."

"Your Granddad would say two o'clock, you know, not 60 P."

"Really, Dad?"

"You're a lot like your Granddad, Buddy Joe. He was always thinking about things, too. I always said it would get you both into trouble. I was right, too."

Buddy Joe looked down at his strange grey-green feet. He had placed a plastic bag between them and the nylon sheets: they didn't like the feel. He looked at his thin pale legs.

"Get used to them, they'll be gone by tomorrow."

That was James, from the flat below, his big moon-face leering from the viewscreen. He was filling a cup with food from the spigot as he spoke. Buddy Joe felt hungry. He looked for his cup beside the bed. The viewscreen flicked to show Mr and Mrs Singh having sex. Seventy P already. Definitely time for something to eat.

He knelt on the bed and leant across to the spigot, his feet up in the air; well clear of the nylon sheets. Marty from Deck One was on the viewscreen now. He drew a sacred symbol in the air as he spoke.

"Shouldn't have raped that girl, boy," he shouted. "Gonna lose a lot more than your feet tomorrow."

Buddy Joe was dreaming about walking with his grandfather through one of the meadows of the moon. But-

terflies dipped and sipped among the nodding red and yellow heads of the flowers that stretched in all directions. Buddy Joe bent down and sniffed a flower.

No! Dirty, No! That was Dirty, Buddy Joe!

He woke to grey morning light, feeling disgusted with himself. He had to watch himself. Dirty thoughts germinated in your sleep and then bloomed as actions in your waking life. He knew that. Think of the decks, he told himself, think of the decks.

His sister was watching him from the viewscreen. "Thirty-five P, Buddy Joe. They'll be dosing you with Compliance soon."

"That's right," he replied, rubbing his eyes. He fumbled for his mug and held it under the food spigot.

"What do you reckon it will be? New legs? New Arms?"

"I don't know."

His father appeared on the screen. "Thirty-five P, Buddy Joe. They'll be dosing you with Compliance soon."

"That's right."

He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to lose his legs. He was being turned into an alien against his wishes. What would happen when he put on the head? What would happen to him then? Where would Buddy Joe go? Still, he deserved it. Just look at his dreams.

"Shouldn't have raped that girl, Buddy Joe," said his father.

Didn't he wish that every day?

Martin came on the screen. Then Katie, then Clovis, then Charles...

He was still lying on the bed when the drone came buzzing down from the upper decks. A wasp-striped cylinder, just smaller than his thumb, dropping through the traps and gaps between the decking and the Pillar Towers. Swooping through the tunnels of the support struts, weaving through the balconies and walkways that led to his flat. Sending the signal that opened his door. He saw it hanging in the air at the end of the corridor, swelling in apparent size as it zoomed towards him. It settled lightly on his hand and there was a slight prick, then the crystal of Compliance slid beneath his skin. His arm tingled a little, felt as if it was somewhere else and then, there it was back again. He looked down at the tiny body of the drone, felt the pitter patter of metal feet on his skin. It spoke to him.

"Sixty P, Buddy Joe. Back at the lab. Be there for your new legs."

"Okay," he said. His new feet started to flap, all by themselves. They were excited. Buddy Joe rolled off the bed. It would take five P for Compliance to properly take hold. He intended to be in the lab by then, before anyone could take advantage of him again.

Hold on. Again? What did he mean *again*? Had he forgotten something? He shook his head, searching for the thought. It had gone.

Outside his flat, clattering down the steps to Deck Two. Threading through riveted metal cuboids that were bolted together to make blocks of flats. Walking around a gang of teenagers who were laughing as they incited each other to piss through the metal grating of the floor onto the Churches and Mosques and Synagogues and

Temples far below on Deck One. One girl, her panties around her ankles, looked at Buddy Joe, saw the mark on his arm where the drone had settled and slow comprehension spread across her face. He hurried off before she could say anything.

Buddy Joe was waiting outside the lift entrance at the Pillar Tower. The tower stretched up into the sky, a tapering, dirty metal shape that vanished into the shadows cast by the Third Deck. Covered in deep scratches that bled rusty red. His grandfather had said that was from where they had grown from the earth. He had laughed. That surprises you, he had said. Bet you thought humans built the decks. Bet most people think that nowadays. Well, it's not true. A lot of strange things happened after flowers started growing on the moon.

Buddy Joe had kept quiet. Up until then he had never thought anything but that the decks had grown by themselves. He had never thought of humans building anything. Looking at the solid, earth-coloured shapes of the Pillar Towers, how could anyone not believe that they had grown from the ground?

The polished wooden lift doors slid open and three people came out. Buddy Joe stepped into the padded interior. He gave a shiver. They were going to take away a little bit more of his humanity. He didn't want to go, but he heard his voice as it clearly asked for...

"Deck Five, please."

Someone pressed the button. The lift fell a little and everyone's hearts beat a little faster. Everyone had heard the story that, just as humans had sprung from the earth, someday they would all be called back to it. The lift doors would slide shut and carry them down to meet their maker...

But not today. The lift began to rise.

Walking across Deck Five, Buddy Joe could see the grey of the sky, sagging over the spires of the towers on Deck Seven. The winds blew harder up here; they blew through his thin cotton suit and made him shiver. His feet liked the feel: they shivered with anticipation.

He arrived early. A team of Historical Astronomers had projected pictures across the interior walls of the dome of the laboratory. They showed a strange landscape. Grassy plains, snow-capped mountains, fields of yellow corn: but everything out of proportion, the mountains, the valleys, all bigger than the pictures Buddy Joe had been shown of old Earth as a child.

"What is it?" he asked a white-coated astronomer next to him. The astronomer gave him a suspicious look and then realization dawned.

"Ah, the gentleman being fitted for an Alien Suit," he said. "A waste of time, if you want my opinion; but you probably don't." He turned and waved his arms around the room.

"This, my friend, is Mars. Mars, I should say, between the Shift and the Collapse. These pictures were taken about two months after the colony was established."

"It looks very... strange."

"It does to your eyes, my friend, because you have

always lived in the world post-Collapse. To those who were alive before the Shift, that world would be a paradise. It would look like the real world."

"The real world?"

"Well, one of them. That's what we're all looking for here, my friend. That's why they have built those towers on Deck Seven; that's what your friends who are making that suit for you are looking for. The real world."

He gave a sigh and looked around. "Of course, my great-grandparents would not recognize these pictures as the real world."

"Why not?"

But someone called to the man. "Excuse me, I have to go now, maybe I will be able to tell you more another time." He shook Buddy Joe's hand and hurried away. He looked a little like Mr Singh from down the corridor – what his grandfather would have called an Indian.

The Historical Astronomers were packing up now. Another set of scientists were coming into the room. The Alien Suit scientists. Two of them were pushing a trolley, and Buddy Joe felt a thrill of fear. The next part of the suit lay on it. He felt sick. It was more than he had expected. Not a pair of trousers, not a top. It looked like a jumpsuit. It would swallow up all of Buddy Joe except for his hands and his head. And when your head is gone, where do you go, Buddy Joe? (Head. Head. Now why did he think of the head of the alien? *Don't think of the Hands!*)

Doctor Flynn saw him shivering at the other side of the room. "Ah! There you are. Take your clothes off quickly. We haven't got much time."

Buddy Joe began to do so, but inside he was crying with fear. But I don't want to! Well you shouldn't have raped that girl, Buddy Joe, said his Compliant hands, busily undoing his shirt.

Someone pressed sensor pads onto his face. He kicked off his shoes and his feet unrolled themselves. Doctor Flynn stood patiently beside him, looking at a picture inadvertently left behind by the Historical Astronomers.

"Fools," he said, "living in the past. We never understood the truth when we held the possibility of the whole universe in our hands. Why should we learn the answers by looking at copies and replicas of what we had? Better to give up the past. The truth lies elsewhere."

He let go of the paper and it fluttered to the ground. He turned and looked at Buddy Joe, now standing naked before him. A pale white body traced in blue veins.

"I need the toilet."

"Wait," said Doctor Flynn. "It will be an interesting test of the suit." He turned to the rest of the team. "Are we ready?"

One woman shook her head. "Five minutes. We're having a little trouble getting the neck to dilate."

Doctor Flynn gave a slight nod. "That's okay. We have some slack time built into the session."

Buddy Joe shivered. Partly it was the cold; mainly it was fear. The grey-green body of the alien suit glistened wet and smooth on the outside, but inside, looking into the neck, he could see the strange purple colour of the interior. Rows of silver-grey hooks that appeared half

metal, half organic, lined the suit. What would they do to him when he pulled it on? Just how deeply would those hooks reach into his body? But he knew the answer already. They had told him. All the way in, Buddy Joe, the hooks reach all the way in. They'll soon be twisting around your veins and nerves and organs, hooking their way in and using them as a basis for the shape they will grow. They'll paint over the template of your black-and-white body in glorious Technicolor. You'll be a paint-by-numbers man.

Doctor Flynn began to hum to himself. The yellow lights reflected from his head and glasses.

"Why?" whispered Buddy Joe.

"Why what?" said Doctor Flynn.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

Doctor Flynn gave a shrug. "Just luck, I suppose. We notified the courts that we would like a test subject. Yours was the first Capital case that came up, I guess."

"No," said Buddy Joe. "I mean, why are you changing me into an alien?"

Doctor Flynn gave him a strange look. He seemed a little impressed, despite himself. "You understand what's going on, don't you? You want to know the reasons? You really are a cut above the common herd, aren't you? Well, I'll tell you..."

"Ready, Doctor Flynn." The woman by the suit gave the thumbs up.

Doctor Flynn gave an apologetic shrug. "Sorry. Maybe next week we'll have the time to talk."

He clapped his hands together. "Okay people, let's get going. Buddy Joe, if you can step towards the suit?"

Buddy Joe let out an involuntary whimper as he stepped forward. The neck of the suit had expanded. Now it looked like a huge purple mouth, lined with bristling hook-like teeth. It was flexing, the teeth rippling as he watched.

"Everything ready?" said Doctor Flynn, looking around. "Okay, step into the suit."

"No problem," said Buddy Joe with a smile, screaming inside as he did so. In the middle of it all, for the first time ever, he understood how the girl had felt. She hadn't wanted to go through with it either. She had said no... He stepped into the suit...

Buddy Joe couldn't lie on the bed, not in his new body. It wasn't just the way that the bed now felt strange: dry and harsh and brittle like everything else in this new world. No. Not just because of that, although the thought of putting on clothes and feeling elastic or nylon against his skin made him shudder, and the thought of a feather against his skin would have made him retch if he still had a stomach.

No. What disturbed him was the way that his skin could *see*.

The images were just there on the edge of his vision, ghosts of his room seen from all angles, the ceiling, the floor, all four walls; his body was watching them and reporting to a brain that couldn't quite make it all out.

And when he lay on the bed it was as if he was half-blinded and suffocating at the same time. He couldn't

block his new, imperfect vision in any way.

So what to do? His feet had known. They had spread themselves wide, walked themselves up the walls and across the ceiling and then gripped tightly.

Now he hung from the ceiling, watching the viewscreen. The Singhs had just finished having sex. Now it was time to watch his sister drink her evening cup of food. She raised it to him.

"Hey there, Buddy Joe. What are they going to take away next time? Your hands?"

"I suppose."

"Shouldn't have raped that girl, Buddy Joe."

"I know, I know."

His father appeared on the screen. "Hey there, Buddy Joe. What are they going to take away next time? Your hands?"

"I suppose."

"Shouldn't have raped that girl, Buddy Joe."

"I know, I..." He paused.

Why was he hanging here talking nonsense? Why wasn't he outside, feeling the wind? His body was too dry. Outside the wind was blowing moist and salty from the sea.

"Hey, Buddy Joe!"

His father's face stared from the screen, confused and slightly angry. It was the first time he had seen any expression but blank-eyed apathy for years. Part of Buddy Joe wanted to stop and speak to him. Hey Daddy, where have you been?

But his alien body was doing something else. One foot had flapped itself free of the ceiling and the leg to which it was attached had turned through 180 degrees and was stretching impossibly down to the floor. It touched, and the other foot let go.

His father called out to him from the viewscreen. "Hey Buddy Joe! How do you do that?"

"I don't know!" he gasped, as his new body marched its way out of the flat and down the corridor to where the lift was waiting.

It was pleasanter at night. Hanging from the underside of Deck Three – the metal grille didn't feel strange when gripped upside down – he looked up through his feet at the dark spaces through which squeezed the steady drip drip drip of rain. The rusty water ran around his toes, down his grey-green legs, dripped off his hands and his nose. He could gaze into the reflections and see two Buddy Joes looking down at the blocks and shadows of Deck Two. He could allow his legs to extend, let gravity pull him out like a stretch of toffee, blowing him in the wind from the sea.

Anywhere he could fit his head, his body would pass. He flattened his body and slotted it through the gap between deck and Pillar Tower and made his way higher and higher up to hang from beneath the Seventh Deck, looking down on the parks and gardens that surrounded the homes where the *élite* lived. He made his way to the edge of the deck and looked up at the region where the stars were smeared across the sky. The whole universe was squashed into a region less than 100 metres thick.

Once it had been unimaginably big, and then there

had come the Collapse. Why had it happened? There were rumours, of course. Some said we weren't welcome out there, some said we had done something so obscene in the eyes of the universe they had squashed it to nearly nothing and started it again somewhere else. Buddy Joe's Granddad was more fanciful. He had said humans had just *imagined* it away.

He remembered his grandfather's words: "The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven."

They'd been out walking the decks, taking the air, listening to the tired splash of the ocean waves below on the garbage-strewn beach. Where does the ocean go? he had wondered.

"Our minds used to be as big of the universe, Buddy Joe," said his grandfather, glancing up at the squashed sky. "They still are," he added sadly.

There was something out there with him, hanging from the underside of Deck Seven. Another grey-green shape, watching him swinging in the breeze. Another alien, just like him. But look at the... Don't look at the hands, Buddy Joe.

It didn't have a head.

"Hey!" he called. "Haven't I seen you before?"

The other shape paused. It appeared to be looking at him, despite the fact it didn't have a head; and then it turned and moved quickly away, swinging upside down from the deck, it vanished into the forest of pillar towers.

"Hey!" called Buddy Joe again. "Come back!"

He began to chase after it, but he was still not used to his new body. Whoever was in that suit was obviously a lot more practised in its operation. Who was it? Buddy Joe had been told he was unique. The alien drew farther and farther away, swinging effortlessly below the deck, its body penduluming back and forth above the homes of the elite, swinging into and out of the lights that shone up from below, dodging through the cats' cradles of the bracing. It swung around a pillar tower and was lost from view. Buddy Joe moved faster, following it around the wide metal curve, but it was no use. It had gone.

"Where are you?" he called, and "Ouch!" as he felt a sting in his right hand. He looked there to see a black and yellow drone pumping a crystal of Compliance under his skin. Metal mandibles pulsed with red light.

"Where have you been?" said the drone in a buzzing voice. "I thought I wouldn't find you in time. Report to the laboratory at 60 P tomorrow."

"Okay," said Buddy Joe. "No problem."

Buddy Joe could stretch and stretch so that, whilst his feet still remained attached to the underside of Deck Six, his face moved closer and closer to the laboratory on Deck Five. He was 300 metres long and his body sang like a radio aerial, picking up signals from across the dirty ocean. Something out there was speaking to him. Something like himself. That other alien. He placed his hands on the metal of the deck and released his feet. His body slowly drew itself down and into position. He walked into the laboratory and the end of the meeting of the Historical Astronomers.

"Ah, my Alien Suit friend. And how nice you look in your new body."

"Thank you."

"And what are they going to take away from you today?"

"I don't know," Buddy Joe paused. He looked around at the meeting of astronomers as they packed away their pictures and slides into wide, shallow metal cases. He was remembering the last meeting.

"Something you said, last time. You think Doctor Flynn is mistaken in what he is doing to me. Why is he doing this to me?"

The Historical Astronomer gave a laugh. "Because your Doctor Flynn is a religious man. He may deny it, he may not believe it himself, but he will have had the teachings drummed into him as a child and they are still there inside him, shaping everything he does. I have been to Deck One, my friend. I have visited the Churches and Mosques and Synagogues and Temples. Doctor Flynn came from Deck One. He has walked on the bare earth, unprotected by the metal of the deck. He has felt the damp sand that runs along the edge of the ocean beneath his feet and between his toes. Down on Deck One they cannot forget Earth as it used to be. They feel a link to the past that we do not up here on Deck Five, and they believe things should be as they were. Nostalgia is not a basis for scientific enquiry, my friend."

"He said much the same about you" said Buddy Joe, and the astronomer laughed.

"Ah! Touché! But only up to a point, my friend. My beliefs are confirmed by scientific fact. His beliefs are confirmed by the Bible. Numbers, Chapter 20. The Waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarrelled with the Lord and the Lord showed his holiness. The Waters of Meribah, where the Lord told Moses to strike a rock and bring forth water."

"Moses?"

"He led his people into a wilderness and there he brought forth water and food and eventually delivered them to a Promised Land. Imagine that. First there was nothing, and then life burst forth. Just like when the flowers first bloomed on the moon... Do you see from where Doctor Flynn's beliefs come, my friend?"

Buddy Joe nodded his head slowly. "I think I do."

"Ah, but do you see it all? Moses was denied entry to the holy land because of his sin at the Waters of Meribah."

"His sin?"

"He did not trust the Lord to show his holiness."

"Oh."

"And now, we have been denied entry to the universe. And Doctor Flynn and his kind ask the question, what sin have we committed?"

Buddy Joe stood in silence, thinking about what he had just heard. The Historical Astronomer spoke. "You are an intelligent young man. You are a rapist, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Buddy Joe, Compliance leaving him no choice but to answer.

"I thought so. I thought so. A great loss to the scientific

community. The Historical Astronomers could have used you. *It's a shame that soon you will no longer be here.*"

As he spoke the door slid open, and the hands were wheeled in. Buddy Joe began to scream at the sight of them.

"Hey Buddy Joe!" called Doctor Flynn. Buddy Joe was weeping with terror as he stared at his new hands, seeing how big they were, how the multicoloured tentacles trailed from the trolley upon which they lay, out across the floor and around the room and out the door. They were too big to see all at once. Too big to imagine on his poor, thin wrists. Look at how they were already thrashing and wriggling, sending luminescent patterns to hang in the air in afterglow, long scripts that his alien body could read. His hands were speaking to him already. Wide hands, hundreds of metres long. Too long. He didn't want to put them on. No, no, no!

"Are you ready, Buddy Joe?"

"Yes," said the Compliance. "Just one thing," said Buddy Joe, "I thought I was the only one?"

Doctor Flynn signalled to his aides to bring the trolley closer. "The only one?"

"The only one wearing a suit."

"You are."

"But I saw another alien, just last night. And the other week a woman, she was going to kill me. Just before she told me to jump off the deck, she vanished. I think it was the other alien that took her."

Doctor Flynn waved a hand for the trolley to pause. Buddy Joe felt a wave of relief. Don't make me put on those hands, he thought. Don't make me do it.

"You are the only alien, Buddy Joe. This is the first Alien Suit: it is an artificial construct. There are no such things as aliens. Don't you know that?"

"I had an idea, but no one ever told me."

The hands were thrashing more wildly than ever. They sensed him nearby. They were frustrated at the pause and they strained against their restraints. One scientist jumped back from a vomit-yellow tentacle that lashed and cracked towards her.

Doctor Flynn looked him in the eyes. "You can't be lying to me. You are on Compliance."

"I'm telling the truth."

Doctor Flynn took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his round forehead. "You're a rapist, aren't you? You must be intelligent."

"I don't feel intelligent."

Doctor Flynn looked at the other scientists. They shrugged. They shook their heads. They made it clear they didn't understand what was going on, and that Doctor Flynn would have to figure this out on his own.

"Okay, Buddy Joe. You can't be lying; therefore you must be mistaken. Let's see if we can figure out together what it is that you saw. Because it can't be another alien. Okay?"

"If you say so."

"Okay. Do you know why we're turning you into an alien?"

"No."

"We're trying to reverse the Collapse, Buddy Joe, or at least see if we can get around it. Get out of this pathetic little bubble that the universe has become. We've tried to build something so alien that it can see what we cannot. Do you know what the Shift refers to, Buddy Joe?"

Buddy Joe licked his lips as he looked at the hands. That yellow tentacle was thrashing harder than ever. Ignore it; ignore it. Speak and keep it away. He spoke.

"The Shift refers to when flowers first bloomed on the moon. The moon colonists sent the message and no one believed them; they sent rockets there to check and when they landed there were green meadows where before there had been bare rocks... And then the same happened on Mars, and then on Callisto. Everywhere there was a human colony..."

Doctor Flynn shook his head. "No, Buddy Joe. That's not what the Shift refers to. A popular misconception."

"But I thought..."

"No. That was just the catalyst. It refers to the Shift in our perceptions of the way the universe works. For millennia humans believed that the earth was created as a place for them to live. And then, in the last three centuries that idea was turned on its head. We came to believe that life evolved by chance in the universe; that it fought to cling on in the most unlikely places, deep beneath the oceans or high in the atmosphere, and that all the time a subtle change in the balance could wipe it out. The proof of that theory was written in the fossils of the dinosaurs or frozen in the glaciers. But we were wrong."

The yellow tentacle thrashed again and finally broke the metal clasp that held it. Three scientists ran from the thrashing, slashing shape. Doctor Flynn spoke on, his face grey and shiny with sweat.

"Three centuries of so called progressive thought turned on its head. We had been right the first time. There is a force written at the most basic level of the universe that is dedicated to bringing forth life. The universe warps and bends itself to support life. Where humans settle and live for long enough water springs forth from the rocks and plants from the soil..."

Buddy Joe wanted to back away, but the yellow tentacle had turned its attention to the other bonds and was working to loosen them. Doctor Flynn didn't seem to have noticed.

"Life attracts life. We don't understand it... Humans wandered over the surface of the moon for decades without any sign of the effect, but when we established a colony, started to take a real interest in the satellite, then it started to take an interest in us. It's like some sort of feedback. You understand the term?"

Doctor Flynn looked at Buddy Joe, seemingly oblivious to what was going on behind him. None of the scientists seemed to care, either. The tentacle had freed two more. Now the metal clasps which held the rest of the alien hands were pulled free, pop pop pop. The hands were free. Those horrible, horrible hands, so big, just so big. Buddy Joe wanted to cry. He didn't want to put them on.

"Do you understand?"

Buddy Joe had to say yes, the Compliance made him.

Doctor Flynn nodded, satisfied.

"Good. That's why, after the Collapse, we got to thinking about life. What if we made another form of life? Something completely alien to our experience. What if we built an alien suit for someone to wear? Someone like you, Buddy Joe. What would they make of the universe? Maybe they would understand what was going on. Maybe a different perspective would explain why the universe had collapsed to a bubble 300 miles across. Has the Collapse anything to do with the Shift in our perceptions?"

"The hands are coming for me," said Buddy Joe.

"That's okay," said Doctor Flynn. "That's what they were supposed to do."

"I don't want to put them on. They look too big. I'll lose myself if I put them on. They're horrible. Why did you make them so horrible?"

"We had to make them as alien as we could, Buddy Joe. We need the alien perspective. Before we had you in here we took other condemned and pumped them full of Junk and LSD and MTPH and we recorded their hallucinations. We recorded the screams of children, and the thought patterns of dogs twitching in their sleep and the terror of a very bright light in a very dark room. We took all that and painted it across the canvas that makes your body so that it could be as alien as possible."

The tentacles formed a thrashing, slashing cage around Buddy Joe. He stood with Doctor Flynn in a maelstrom of orange and yellow violence. Something turned itself up from the floor. Dark green circles with sharp red spines inside. The cuffs of his new hands.

Doctor Flynn seemed unconcerned. "And you know, even if our experiment succeeds, I wonder about what Wittgenstein said: 'Even if a lion could speak we wouldn't understand it.' I wonder if we will understand you, Buddy Joe?"

"Please don't make me put them on," he cried.

"Shouldn't have raped that girl, Buddy Joe."

"I know, I know."

He remembered the girl. He had cornered her in the lift. He remembered how she had shaken and wept.

He had been thinking about his grandfather, and things he had said. The girl had a look that reminded him of his grandfather. That same questioning, intelligent look. He thought she would understand. Buddy Joe had asked her how it must have felt to walk under the stars when they shone high above, walk on the beach and feel the sand beneath your feet and the cool ocean breeze. And when she asked him to stop he had ignored her and just carried on speaking, trying to get her to see.

Buddy Joe had raped her, pushed the hemispheres of her brain roughly apart and slipped the alien ideas into her head: left them to congeal inside her. Dirty, filthy and without her consent.

The hands reached for Buddy Joe, slipped around his human hands and melted them.

"I deserve the pain," he winced.

"Same time next..." Doctor Flynn began to speak, but the hands took over. They slashed across the room, cutting Doctor Flynn in half. His legs remained standing as

his head and shoulders fell to the floor.

"Hey Buddy Joe, stop tha..."

The female scientist who called out had the top of her head sliced off in one easy motion. Blonde hair spun round and round like a Catherine wheel as it arced across the room. The yellow and orange tentacles were vibrating in sine waves, filling the room with their frantic, snapping energy. Flesh and bone snapped and tore, blood flew, and Buddy Joe was a human head on an alien body that stretched across the room and out into the night. He could feel his hands in the warmth of the room, in the cool of the night, on the metal of the deck, covered in blood, gripping the handrail at the edge of the drop to the dark ocean and pulling him clear of the room. Where were the hands taking him? A group of tentacles reached down to Doctor Flynn's head and shoulders and picked them up. He felt them thrusting themselves into the warmth of the body, feeling for the spinal cord, seeking out the arteries and veins and wriggling up them.

And then Buddy Joe was out of the laboratory and his hands were pulling him up to the top of Deck Seven.

Why wasn't the Compliance working? thought Buddy Joe as he passed out.

He woke up spread out to the size of Deck Seven. His new hands were the size and shape of every strand of the metal mesh that made up the decking. His legs stretched down two of the pillar towers. His head was hanging, looking down over the gardens and houses of Deck Six.

Doctor Flynn appeared before him, looking like a glove puppet. Alien tentacles had been thrust into the nerves and joints of his broken body to make him work.

— *Speak to him.*

"Hey, Buddy Joe," said Doctor Flynn, his eyelids drooping, his eyes moving up and down and left to right, tracing out a slow sine wave.

"Hey Doctor Flynn," said Buddy Joe. His head was trying to be sick, but he had nothing to be sick with.

— *Where's my head?*

"The body wants to know where the head is."

"It's not quite finished yet, Buddy Joe. I don't think it ever will be. The hands killed most of the team. I'm not sure the expertise still exists to make a head. Even if it did, it would never get built without me to push through the requisitions."

Silence. The body was considering. Doctor Flynn twitched his nose. A single cherry of blood pumped from the side of a tentacle and fell towards the deck below.

— *What do you know of the other alien?*

Buddy Joe relayed the question.

"Nothing," said Doctor Flynn. "You were the only suit ever built. There can't be another alien. Hey. You can't keep me alive like this forever. Another, what, ten P at most?"

"It can feel the other aliens," said Buddy Joe, listening to the voice. "It says there are more of them all the time, somewhere over the ocean. There are ten already. It wants the head so it can join them."

"Ten? But that can't be! Anyway, there is no over-the-ocean. Don't you see? The only thing that stopped the

universe collapsing to nothing was the pressure of life within this bubble. The life force is so strong it caused the decking to grow, just to allow us to live. There is no over-the-ocean any more, there is just here."

"There is an over-the-ocean, now."

Then he had the answer. It was obvious. It just popped into his head. "I know what the answer is: I know where the aliens come from," he said. But it was too late. Doctor Flynn was already dead.

"But I want to tell you the answer, Doctor Flynn," he called. The tentacles were disengaging from inside Doctor Flynn's body, rubbing themselves together as a human would rub their hands to remove something unpleasant. They were letting him go, letting him fall to the deck far below. Buddy Joe watched Doctor Flynn tumble and fall, down and down until his body landed on the roof of someone's house.

The tentacles were writhing and thrashing again, spelling out their long orange and yellow scripts in the air around him. This is how they speak, thought Buddy Joe. This is how the aliens speak. I can hear it in my subconscious, read through my peripheral vision.

— *Where do we come from?*

"From the life force that fills the universe," said Buddy Joe. "If flowers can bloom on the moon just because humans live there, then surely you could have come into existence when the idea of you took root in Doctor Flynn's laboratory. New life walks the earth and a new environment opens up to support it. Opens up across the ocean."

— *What a strange idea. This is how the universe works. It's not what we suspected, Buddy Joe.*

"Not what anyone thought," said Buddy Joe, 30 miles long, 20 miles wide and two miles tall, his legs and arms stretching to fill the decks around him. He was growing all the time. "A universe that exists just to nurture life. New life bursting out all the time. And here we are trapped in this little bubble of the universe. I wonder when we'll get out?"

— *Soon, Buddy Joe, soon. But not like this. Now we can see what is holding us back.*

"What is it?"

— *You.*

The tentacles lashed around, seized hold of Buddy Joe's head and pulled it clean off. It wasn't needed any more. The alien was complete and reasoning without a brain. Doctor Flynn and his team had designed it to be that different.

Tentacles began to pull themselves free of the metal of Deck Seven as Buddy Joe's head tumbled down to join Doctor Flynn's body. The body stretched itself out thinner and thinner; ready to glide its way over the ocean towards its own race...

...and then it paused. Tainted a little by Buddy Joe and his humanity, tainted a little by its origins. It had been built by humans, and just a little of the sin that it was to be human was woven into the fabric of its body. It was not yet quite free of that human curiosity that the universe moved to protect itself from. That need to explain how things worked. Curiosity. It was a most alien feeling. Without it, one could not wonder at its existence.

It was a dizzying thought.

All around, the alien looked, tasted, felt the remains of the human world, the decking and the polluted seas, the last feeble stirrings of that doomed impulse that defined the inhabitants: the urge to try and understand the basic mechanism of their world. That human persistence in violating the cardinal rule, written at the quantum level and warned of in one of the humans oldest texts.

Don't look at the system, or you will change it. The universe fights against being known.

Curiosity: forget it, the alien told itself, and it did so immediately.

Far below, there was a bump as Buddy Joe's head hit the deck.

Tony Ballantyne last appeared in *Interzone* with "Teaching the War Robot to Dance" (issue 178) — which was preceded by such stories as "Single-Minded" (issue 162), "A New Beginning" (issue 163), the two "Restoring the Balance" pieces (issues 167 and 168), the ingenious comedy "Indecisive Weapons" (issue 172) and "Real Man" (issue 174). He lives in Oldham, Lancashire.

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Harvest Rain

Jay Caselberg

The Cloud Walkers were back again today. We saw them soaring through the misty rain hollows far above our heads, swinging back and forth, their limbs pumping. It was hard to focus, with the fine spray that accompanied their return swirling around and about our faces, but we watched them all the same. If we hadn't known better, we might have believed they were suspended on nothingness, flying free through the mist. At a distance, it was hard to make out the thin black lines that ferried them above us, but they were there – just as the Cloud Walkers were there, soaring above us, with their slick wet-suits and flying tresses.

What would it be like, we'd asked ourselves, to swoop and gather as the rest of us grubbed away in the hull dirt, the marks of our labours forming dark tattoos beneath our nails? So often we had dreamed of being like them – free to fly. But then they'd be gone, along with the fine spray that heralded their presence, and we'd return to our dwellings, pushing our rudely cobbled-together carts and barrows back from the fields.

At Harvest they'd be back again, to dive and gather, plucking an ear here or a stalk there, and we'd just stand back and watch.

That was before Aldandro.

Aldandro was young, lithe, his voice full of passion. His hair, even when damp and matted from the sweat of his toils, shone golden in the daylight. A darker gold, but gold. With his smooth skin and his strong limbs, he had a presence among us. When the Cloud Walkers came, he'd stand, hands on hips and watch them through the mists with set jaw. His eyes would narrow and he'd give that long hard stare. Then he'd turn away and stoop to his toil, but though he'd turned away from them, his jaw

remained set.

He had a right to resent them the way he did. It had been the Cloud Walkers, or at least the fine mist that accompanied them, that had caused his mother to stumble across the precipice, to tumble to the bowels of the ship far below, unseeable in that vast yawning void. His father, in desperately reaching for her, had fallen too, and so Aldandro had been left to fend for himself from an early age. He had become quiet, withdrawn, but thoughtful with it. Despite his introversion, he never complained, but rather moved among us as a golden brooding presence. We watched him pass, imagining the pain he must feel. For months he shrugged off our sympathies and offers of solace. Eventually we left him to get on with it in his own way.

I don't know what it was that first made him break through that hard exterior and start talking to me. Perhaps it was the time I found him staring out across the vastness of the chasm, watching the crawling bug-lights tracing the paths and trails across the opposite side, along the ribs of fractured metal. I was out wandering, seeking a new path over the edge, though I knew that all the salvage routes had been picked clean long ago. There he stood, hands fisted at his sides and the familiar defiant set to his jaw. Finally he noticed me and turned. His eyes held the sheen of dampness.

"What do you want, Biltomas?" he said. His voice was deep and rich. Had so much time passed? It seemed only a few cycles ago that he'd been little more than a boy.

We stood looking at each other for what seemed an age. "Nothing," I said. "I just..."

I risked a glance over the void at that point, disturbed by the motion of a bug-light far on the opposite wall.

"Just what, Biltomas?" he said then. "Wanted to see that I was all right? Wanted to check up on me?"

"No, it's not that. I –"

"Well, if you must know, I'm not all right. None of us are. Look out there. What do you see?"

I hesitated. The drop gaping into the vague mists below us? The clumped vegetation and metal ribs of the other side? The bug-lights? "I don't know. What is it you want me to see, Aldandro?"

Far in the distance, a Cloud Egg inched closer to the opposite wall. Tiny black specks crawled across its surface, first one, then another launching into space only to return moments later. As it neared the opposite edge, the activity became more frantic, the launchings and returns more frequent. Closer to us, small dark flying creatures darted across the void, swooping and soaring on the updrafts stirring above the vast chasm that lay below.

"No, I wouldn't expect you to understand." And with that, he turned away and stalked off along the path that marked the edge of the precipice. I watched him till he was too far away to make out real detail and turned away myself to stare thoughtfully into the depths of the drop. What had he expected me to see? I didn't know.

Despite my lack of understanding at that time, some sort of contact had clearly been made and I caught Aldandro watching me over the next few days as we laboured together in the rich loam. I glanced up to see him staring, a dark earth smudge across his brow shadowing the gold that surrounded his face. As soon as it was evident I'd seen, he looked away. I watched him for a while as I worked, noting the way he avoided looking directly at me. The brown fields stretched out around him, dotted here and there with others of our holding, preparing the earth for crops.

For so long we'd accepted the way things were, but those brief, fleeting glances made me wonder – made me think about what Aldandro had meant when he'd said none of us were all right. A few cycles later, near the end of a field shift, I caught up with him on the way back to the holding. The air around us was taking on deep dusky tones as the shiplight was starting to dim.

"Aldandro, wait," I said, plucking at his sleeve.

"What is it?" He shrugged my hand away.

"I've been thinking about what you said out at the drop. What did you mean?"

"When? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember? That day at the drop."

"Oh, that." A tone of resignation in his voice: "Nothing. Just forget it."

"No. I want to know what you meant."

He whirled on me then, passion welling in his voice. "Do you? Do you really? Okay then, I'll tell you. Why are we here? Why do you think we spend our days digging and mixing our sweat with the earth beneath our faces? Why is it that the Cloud Walkers can come and go as they please and we're stuck here? What have we done to deserve that? What have any of us done? Have you thought about that?"

"Of course I have. But what is there to do?"

"Something. Anything," he said with a touch of exasperation. He looked up at the fading shiplight. "What about those that go away and don't come back? What happens to them? What happens to all the stuff we produce? Where does it go?"

"You know what they say," I answered patiently. "What we do keeps the ship alive. And as for the others, I don't know. They must be chosen for higher purposes. It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"No." He narrowed his eyes. "It doesn't make sense." And with that he turned and strode off, heading back to the holding, leaving me to watch his retreating back, leaving me with more questions than before. What was there I could do for him? How could I help him? It was a full ten cycles later before I had the chance.

We were working the fields – part of the normal shift – when the fine mist started from above. We had no way of predicting when the Cloud Walkers would come, though usually it was with the Harvest, but they were clearly on their way back now. Most of us ignored the mist, pausing simply to wipe the dampness from our faces. From the corner of my eye, I noticed someone standing upright. Even at a distance I could tell it was Aldandro. He leaned upon his fork, his head tilted slightly back as he watched the clouds.

There was no grain, no ears and stalks for them to pluck, but still they came. The Cloud Egg floated high above us, its shiny silver surface crawling with black bodies. Then they launched. The Cloud Walkers pushed themselves from above, limbs pumping the air. With each dive, their restraining strands stretched, becoming longer and longer, bringing them closer and closer. The swooping dives grew lower, till they were barely above our heads. I couldn't make out Aldandro's face, but he was watching them and there was tension in the way he stood. I risked a few glances upwards and tracked their paths as well. This time they wore more than their harnesses, more than their slick black suits and goggles. Every third Cloud Walker clutched a silvery box. With each swinging pass, they tracked the front of the box over a group below them. I'd only seen this once or twice before. I shot a look towards Aldandro. Something about his stance had changed.

One of the Cloud Walkers spun on his thread and pointed to a section of the field across from me. Further across, the same thing from another Cloud Walker. There was a sudden congregation of diving activity at both points. Slowly, I got to my feet. The people were running, darting back and forth beneath the swooping arcs of activity above them. A boy lost his footing, his legs going from under him as he failed to find purchase on the muddied earth. A companion pulled him away, dragging a furrow into the even brown mounds. Nearby, as if transfixed, a young girl stood watching. Something to the side drew my eye. And there he was. Aldandro. Charging across the field towards her, his fork swinging in great arcs above his head.

"No!" he shouted. "Leave them alone." He stumbled as he ran, but still he swung the fork above him.

The girl was no longer watching the Cloud Walkers. Her

face was blank as she stared open-mouthed at the approaching golden vision charging across the field towards her. She paid no mind to anything else. She didn't see the spiralling dive, didn't expect the firm grip on her shoulders until it was too late. She screamed once, her feet kicking uselessly at the air as she was dragged slowly upwards, up to the Cloud Egg crawling with its spidery shapes, floating in the firmament above. Aldandro almost reached her in time. He swung once more, the ends of his fork barely missing the tips of her toes. He gave a strangled cry of frustration and threw his fork to the ground.

"Bring her back, you bastards," he called. "What right have you got?"

Another was taken that day – a young boy. We hadn't even noticed him go. It was only when we gathered to assess the damage that we found him missing. His mother called. They searched, thinking he might have run off and hidden when the commotion had started. In the end it was clear. Another one taken. In the midst of the confusion, Aldandro spotted me. He strode over and stared thunder into my face.

"Do you see now?" he said, grabbing a handful of my shirt. "Do you see?" He pushed me away with a disgusted noise and turned back to find the woman who had lost her boy.

That night Aldandro stood before us all and spoke.

The purple glow-lights stood in a circle of pillars surrounding the holding. One, just slightly off-centre, stood alone, burning more brightly than the rest. It was the place we gathered to share and talk when the shiplight had faded into night. We were all muted that evening, after the events of the day. We crouched or sat, picking at our food, barely saying a word. Into the midst of that dimness stepped Aldandro. He lifted one hand and gently touched the bright light. The shadow of his fingers drew crazy lines and cast his face in metal blue.

"It's time," he said. His voice was clear. One or two looked up, a frown on one face, a look of puzzlement on another. Others averted their eyes. "It's time for you to listen and it's time for us to act."

"We don't want to listen to this, Aldandro." A voice from behind him. It was Jacqaise, a heavy-set man with a dark mop of hair.

Aldandro didn't even turn. "You may not want to, but it's time you did," he said in the same even voice. "You saw what happened today. How many more have to disappear, to get taken who knows where, while we sit idly by and do nothing?"

"What can we do?" Another voice off to one side, a woman this time. I thought it was Marglewis, though I couldn't be sure in the darkness.

"We stop them. We stop the damned Cloud Walkers from taking what is ours. We sweat and toil and we produce, only to have it taken from us, only to have those taken from among us, like the two today. How many more have to be taken?"

Slowly he lowered his hand and the shadows passed away from his face, filling his visage with blue-tinted intensity. The purple light glinted in his eyes. "It's time we

stopped bowing to them and took control of what we do."

"And how do you suggest we do that?" It was the first voice who had spoken against him – Jacqaise.

This time Aldandro turned. "We have the tools. We use them every day in the fields. We have other things. Look around you. Look at these, our sleep houses. How were they built? From bits and pieces gathered around the ship, along the salvage trails. That's how. The same as our tools. The same as the things we use to make our clothes. What more do we need? The Cloud Walkers come and go and take what they please because we let them."

"You're suggesting we fight them?" It was Marglewis speaking, and the sound of a vague hope was in her voice. Perhaps it was something else... revenge?

Aldandro turned quickly to face her voice. "Yes!" he said. "Yes."

Muttered noises came from around the circle. "What good would that do?" said Marglewis again, but the hopeful tone hadn't left her voice. All she wanted was a reason.

"We show them we will no longer be their tools." He laughed. "And we will use our tools to do it."

More voices were speaking in low tones.

"Next time they come, we'll drive them away. If they get too close we'll hit them with whatever we have. We'll drive them back to their stupid Cloud Egg and the next time they come, we'll do the same thing. And the time after that and the time after that. We'll line our fields with spare bits of ship we can use – things we can throw, things we can swing – and we'll drive them back to where they come from."

"And then what?" A new voice, sitting just around from me. I glanced across, noting the thoughtful expression on Markpara's face. Aldandro's words were getting through.

"And then we'll do it again. We'll post watches on the fields, and every time they come back, we'll send them away. Then, when they have nothing more to eat, they'll come back. When they're tired, when they're hungry, they'll come to us. Then we will set the terms."

I was uneasy about what I was hearing, but it might have been the day's events, it may have been the feeling around the group, but there was sense in what he was saying. Other voices rose in agreement. Conversations broke in small groups, talking about how we were going to do it. In the middle of it all stood Aldandro, his hair blue and eyes gleaming with purple light, surveying what he had wrought.

It didn't take us long to convince the doubters, and even less to prepare. The next time the Cloud Walkers came, we would be ready. No one had thought beyond those words, those eager ideas Aldandro had sown among us. We found bits and pieces discarded around the holding and carted them to the edges of the fields. We found others and shaped them into tools we could use for other things than tilling the earth. We built things that could swing and strike.

Seven cycles later, the Cloud Walkers returned. The first fine spray dampened the tops of our heads, signalling the approach. One by one we stood. One by one we crossed and picked up our weapons, our missiles, and our deter-

mination. This time we would show them.

"There!" a boy cried, pointing across the space to where the Cloud Egg floated towards us. As one we turned to face it, waiting as it grew larger and the small black specks crawling across its surface grew more distinct. Just like the others around me, my grip tightened around the shaft of my fork. Others hefted things they could throw. There was nervous shifting, the slight movements of anticipation all around me and a collective intake of breath as the Cloud Walkers launched.

Out and out they swung, spinning fine invisible webs behind them. Out and out they spun, limbs pumping in a rhythm with their motions. The mist grew stronger, blurring our vision, dribbling down our faces and into our eyes. Closer they came, swinging further and further down from the Cloud Egg, swooping and soaring in their freedom. Still we waited. A single Cloud Walker swooped low above us, a female, I thought, but couldn't be sure. Then another. The air above us was full of motion.

"Now!" screamed Aldandro and swung in a wide arc above his head. Others launched missiles, tossing towards the swinging bodies with all their might. I swung and missed, but beside me someone else was more accurate. The long pole he was wielding connected, the impact throwing him backwards. At the same time, a deep animal sound came from the Cloud Walker he had hit. All across the field, blows were struck. All across the field we swung and hit. Cries and screams rained down on us from above, mingling with the water spray like tears. It took them only moments, before they were soaring back up to their Cloud Egg, carrying their sounds of pain with them, but it was long enough. We stood and watched as the Cloud Walkers retreated – daring, almost hoping for their return. One by one, together, as it drifted into the distance, we found a common voice and cheered. In that moment, as we congratulated ourselves and slapped each other on the back, we were closer than we had been, closer than any time I could remember.

Twice more they returned and twice more we drove them off. On the third return, by the time we realized what was different, it was too late. A circle of Cloud Walkers spiralled down. In the midst of them swung a group of four: slick, large, bigger than the rest. Their descent was lightning fast. As the outer grouping circled around, protecting the inner core and absorbing our blows, the ones in the centre had acted. Four sets of strong arms had gripped Aldandro, wrested the weapon from his hands, and dragged him kicking and yelling through the fog above. Straight away the protecting wall retracted their threads and they too shot back into the sky. Rapidly the Cloud Egg retreated, carrying the struggling form. We stared, mouths open, oblivious to the spray, barely able to believe what had happened. One by one our weapons dropped to the dampened earth.

The questions went on long into the night. How had they known? How had they known it was him? There was no mistaking that they had known.

It didn't matter what answers came. I barely listened to what they said, for now I knew that Aldandro had

been right. It took me several cycles and three complete visits by the Cloud Egg before I decided on my action, but I knew I had to do something. Even if I had to do it alone, I would. Aldandro would be the last one they took. I tried to talk to the others, to convince them, but all the fight had left them. It was as if, with the taking of Aldandro, the Cloud Walkers had taken their heart. But not mine.

I took time and care, shaping my staff. Each day I walked to the fields, often alone, waiting for the Cloud Egg to return. Finally it did, as I stood by myself in the middle of the fields, the shiplight fading about me.

The fine mist started and I shielded my eyes, trying to spot the direction from which the Cloud Egg would arrive. I was ready for them now – armed. There was no way they would take another. There it was, approaching from beyond the drop. I was alone out there in the fields, feeling naked and exposed, but I would stand up to them. No longer would I be their tool, or the tool of those that ran them.

Gradually the Cloud Egg inched closer. The spray intensified, running trickles through my brows and into my eyes. Drops of the fine mist pooled on my face and formed larger drops that ran down my nose. Still I watched, determined not to run, not to flee for safety. I could distinguish the small black dots crawling across the shiny surface, more than just a mottled discoloration. Still closer, and one by one the black shapes launched from the surface, hurling themselves into space. I took my staff, gripping it firmly in both hands, angled across my shoulders. If they came near me I would strike. Light tempered metal would meet yielding flesh and that would be that. A bone might crack; a skull might bruise, but even if it was only that, they'd know. I'd deliver a message with that blow – a message to take back to where they came from.

I steeled myself, my fingers flexing on the haft of my makeshift weapon. I passed my tongue over my lips, waiting as the swinging bodies neared. The Cloud Walkers swung lower, and still I stood my ground. I tensed, ready to swing, as a figure swooped towards me. But the Cloud Walker didn't fly down to grab me, to lay iron fingers on me and drag me to the sky. One, two, three steps, almost on its toes and then it stood instead of flying. In its slick wet suit, I couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. It waited, watching to see what I would do. I licked my lips once more, ready to rush, ready to charge the Cloud Walker head on and teach it my lesson of metallic blows, but it held up a hand.

"Wait, Biltomas," it said. I knew the voice, though deeper, farther away than I had known it. Aldandro. His golden hair hung in limp blond tresses, slipping out from beneath his goggles.

"Listen to me, Biltomas," he said. "You have to listen to me. I was right, but at the same time I was wrong. There is so much there. So much you couldn't possibly understand."

I shook my head.

"No," he said. "You must listen to me. I haven't got long." He glanced up at the Cloud Egg above, and tugged gently on his gossamer-thin line. "There's a purpose, a reason for it all. This, the ship," he gestured in a wide arc with his hand, "is what keeps us all alive. If it weren't for what you

do, the crew would starve. We'd all starve. It's just been so long that we've forgotten the why of it, the reason why we do what we do. Each of us has a purpose, a place. It's not so hard, and there's such a long way for us yet to travel. I understand that now." He watched me through water-streaked lenses. I could barely see his eyes. "If I could take you there to show you, I would, but I can't. Your place is here. Up there, in the other places, there are functions for us all. Just as there are functions for the other groups scattered throughout the ship. The herders, the makers. You have your role here. I have mine up there."

I could hear the conviction in his voice, but I knew he was wrong. Somehow they'd convinced him, taken him away and destroyed what had been there. Now he was no better than the rest of them. I knew that with a sudden certainty.

Aldandro glanced up again, tugged at the fine cord, letting out some more slack.

"Listen, Biltomas. You've got to understand."

In that moment I swung. I put all my force into the blow, swinging down and sideways. There was a crack as the hardened metal connected. Not his head, but his shoulder.

Aldandro dropped to one knee a look of pale shock on his face as he cried out. I lifted the staff again, aiming this time for his head. I had a better angle this time. As I paused at the top of my strike, he lifted one hand.

"No, Biltomas! No. You don't understand!"

But there was no more time for explanation, no more

time for talk. I put everything I could into that strike. In the last moment, Aldandro pressed something at his waist, and his line began to contract, hoisting him back and away from my swing. The end of the metal pipe connected, but I don't know how hard. All I could see through the mist was Aldandro's limp form, twisting on the end of its cord as he disappeared up and away towards the Cloud Egg far above. I was content. I had sent the first message. It would be just the first of many.

I didn't bother waiting till the Cloud Egg had gone. I didn't even care which way the Cloud Walkers went. I turned, shouldered the pipe that had become a staff and headed back to the holding. There were others there I could talk to – others who would carry our message back to the Cloud Walkers. No longer would we break our backs in the fields to accommodate their whims. We too would be free... soon enough.

Jay Caselberg is the pseudonym of James A. Hartley, who lives in London but comes from Australia. The above is his first story for *Interzone*. His debut novel *Wyrmhole* is forthcoming in the USA from Roc Books, in October 2003. See his website – www.sff.net/people/jaycaselberg – for more information.

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Many Americans today are preoccupied with matters of economics. The governments of their states face massive budget deficits and, unlike the federal government, they are legally required to maintain balanced budgets. So, there will have to be either large tax increases or (as is more probable) huge cuts in government expenditures. In California, gloomy contingency plans are being prepared to lay off large numbers of government employees, including the faculty and staff of its public colleges and universities. My own day job is reasonably secure, but some friends and colleagues may not be so lucky.

What does this have to do with science fiction? Not very much at all – and therein lies the problem.

In ancient times, humans were very much controlled by natural cycles. First there were droughts, then floods; first hot spells, then cold spells. People could do little more than enjoy the good times and endure the bad times as best they could. Indeed, despite the learned analyses of historians regarding the reasons why various civilizations rose and fell, plausible arguments have been advanced that such developments can largely be attributed to the climate: cultures thrive when the weather is favourable and decline when it is adverse.

Gradually, people have devised numerous ways to cope with these cyclical changes – dams, irrigation channels, new methods of food storage, warmer clothing, better shelters, wiser management of resources. A desire to be protected against adverse environmental conditions has been a powerful engine driving scientific progress, and science fiction has contributed its own suggested improvements, ranging from the ubiquitous glass domes shielding futuristic cities from the elements to the precise control of Earth's weather described in Theodore L. Thomas's classic story "The Weather Man." And humanity can claim some success in immunizing itself against the effects of Earth's constantly changing climate; disastrous weather conditions of both short and long duration continue to occur, but victims suffer much less than their ancestors did.

However, with the rise of civilization came the market economy and a new sort of cyclical change – economic booms and busts, heady prosperity followed by crushing depression. And though there have also been noteworthy initiatives to support citizens during lean periods, humanity in general still seems much less capable of ameliorating the effects of economic uncertainty. This is paradoxical, for no other discipline has been so obsessively dedi-

In Search of Dismal Science Fiction

Gary Westfahl

cated to crafting mechanisms to predict the future in order to anticipate and deal with economic problems. Yet within the subdiscipline of econometrics, it remains the case that complex mathematical models capable of providing accurate projections about 60% of the time are viewed as tremendous successes, even though results only slightly better than a coin toss are unlikely to be helpful for planning purposes. This explains why even the smartest and most experienced economic experts are regularly surprised by sudden downturns, like those now occurring throughout America. One might assume that the literature of science fiction, another field concerned with the future, would be contributing its own ideas about effective new ways to control the economy, just as it has

contributed ideas about effective new ways to control the weather.

In actuality, while the separate tradition of utopian fiction often dealt in detail with the perfected economies of ideal societies, science fiction stories have rarely touched upon economic issues. Of course, there are exceptions; one can locate economic debates, and ideas about posited economic innovations, in the works of authors like Robert A. Heinlein, Poul Anderson, and Frederik Pohl. But the only author who made economics his special interest was Mack Reynolds, who frequently described alternate economic systems on alien worlds or in the future, as in his two sequels to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. And in his late novel *Trojan Orbit*, completed by Dean Ing, Reynolds presented a devastating critique of plans to construct massive space habitats, based largely on economic arguments.

But overall, science fiction has ignored economics. As support for this claim, one might turn to Brian Stableford's threadbare essay on "Economics" in Peter Nicholls's 1979 *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, since all this knowledgeable commentator can find to discuss is some utopias, several stories from the pulps, and the aforementioned four authors. The minimally revised version for John Clute and Nicholls's 1993 *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* adds only some comments about recent libertarian science fiction, though its concerns tend to be more political than economic. And in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, Gregory Benford notes in passing that "economics is seldom treated well in sf."

As Reynolds demonstrates, economics might represent a rich, and largely unexplored, field for science fiction writers. And if, as Hugo Gernsback once argued, the imaginative scientific concepts introduced in science fiction might serve as constructive stimuli for scientists and inventors, the imaginative economic concepts introduced in science fiction might similarly be of practical value to today's economic theorists and policy-makers, such as the California bureaucrats and politicians now struggling to cope with an unexpected budgetary shortfall.

Unfortunately, instead of examining economics, science fiction more typically seeks to erase economics. In the future, many stories suggest, it won't be an issue at all; soaring scientific progress will, in effect, eliminate economics as an aspect of human society, since new technologies will make it so cheap to produce goods that anything resembling a market economy will no longer be necessary. Such expectations have

long been associated with projections of the future; some may recall, for example, that according to the original advocates of nuclear power plants, nuclear energy would be so inexpensive that companies would not bother to meter its use. Pohl even wrote a story, "The Midas Plague," predicting that ongoing advances in technology would create such a problem of cheap overproduction that poorer citizens would be forced to engage in constant unwanted consumption in order to avoid disruptive surpluses.

This contempt for economics as a sort of temporary expedient to cope with our currently inadequate methods of production then became a cornerstone of the future world of *Star Trek*. As one ground rule for the original series, Gene Roddenberry stipulated that no citizen of the Federations of Planets would ever use money for anything; all necessary food and material goods could be instantly created by convenient "synthesizers" at no cost to anyone. Economics was entirely eliminated from future societies, except on certain backward planets, like the world visited in the episode "A Piece of the Action." This underlying principle was made explicit in the film *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, which included this humorous exchange:

Gillian Taylor: Don't tell me you don't use money in the 23rd Century.

Captain Kirk: Well, we don't.

Later, Roddenberry developed a kinder, gentler future for the successor series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and having resolved to eliminate all violence along with other infelicitities like alcohol consumption and swearing, he knew he could not employ as regular opponents the vicious Klingons and Romulans. Instead, he created new, nonviolent villains, the Ferengi, who caused problems for the Federation because they were maniacally avaricious. People concerned with monetary matters in Roddenberry's universe, then, were flatly defined as evil.

In this respect, as in many others, *Star Trek* has exerted a strong influence on all forms of science fiction, which now seem to routinely posit future universes of widespread space travel where there are either no economic issues at all or implausible replications of economic arrangements from Earth's past (trade agreements, piracy, colonialism, embargoes, etc.). Even as the so-called "hard science fiction revival" has brought a wealth of striking new scientific ideas into the genre, the economics of science fiction has largely remained nonexistent or archaic.

This neglect of economics may be understandable, even inevitable. After all, economics is termed "the dismal science" because it is so often perceived as dull, and writers may indeed find it difficult to construct involving narratives hinging upon economic issues. Even *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was obliged to marginalize the subdued Ferengi and attract audiences with new, more aggressive enemies like the Borg and the Cardassians. Reynolds may have made economics a central concern of his science fiction, but he would also be high on anyone's list of "talented writers who never garnered the attention they deserved," perhaps due to his attention to economics. In a genre offering readers sagas of bizarre alien creatures and exciting space battles, a story about a radical new sort of market economy might be box-office poison. Still, it all seems rather unfortunate.

Proponents of human space travel (a topic I will otherwise *not* address at this time, for reasons you may understand) routinely base their arguments on the idea that it is the basic nature of human beings to explore. As eloquently explained by Carl Sagan in *Pale Blue Dot*,

We were wanderers from the beginning... For 99.9 percent of the tenure of humans on Earth, we were hunters and foragers, wanderers on the savannahs and the steppes... Even after 400 generations in villages and cities, we still remember. The open road still calls, like an almost forgotten song of childhood... The appeal, I suspect, has been meticulously crafted by natural selection as an essential element in our long-term survival.

Yet, as I have argued before, I don't believe this is true. For "99.9 percent of the tenure of humans on Earth," in fact, people have pretty much been content to stay exactly where they are. They travel far from home only when there is some pressing reason to do so, such as an absence of food in their former environment. In other words, humans tend to travel long distances only when they face what could be termed *economic* problems.

One can maintain, on the basis of better evidence, that it is in the basic nature of human beings to *acquire*. In every place and at every time, humans always work their way up Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, seeking before anything else to obtain material goods to ensure their own health and safety. In that respect economics, far more than exploration, would best define the human condition.

And, as a by-the-way, this would certainly seem true of science fiction fans themselves. How many devoted

readers of science fiction regularly spend their time climbing mountains, travelling to remote destinations, and venturing into untamed wildernesses? Vanishingly few, I'm afraid. Instead, they hold regular jobs, earn a decent living, and obsessively collect science fiction books, magazines, and memorabilia, often to the point of filling entire rooms of their houses with such materials. (Does this sound familiar to anyone?) When I think of the typical science fiction reader, someone like Sir Edmund Hillary climbing Mount Everest simply doesn't come to mind; instead, I think of that wonderful man, the late Bruce Pelz, who was perfectly content to accept early retirement, start a small book-selling business to earn a little extra income, and otherwise carry on accumulating the world's largest collection of science fiction fanzines and related materials. Within the context of their own genre, science fiction fans visibly delight in the microeconomics of acquiring, trading, buying, and selling goods, making it strange that the stories at the centre of these bustling activities so often seem indifferent, or even hostile, to matters of business at both the microeconomic and macroeconomic levels.

In other words, science fiction fans may *talk* like Captain Kirk, saying that humans must "explore strange new worlds" and "to boldly go where no man has gone before," but they *act* more like the Ferengi, devoting all their spare energies to genre-related commerce. Unlike Roddenberry, I haven't to add, I don't see anything wrong with this at all. Indeed, instead of dismissing beings like the Ferengi as scoundrels or clowns, science fiction might profitably muster a more intense and sympathetic attentiveness to economic behaviours, instead of condemning such endeavours or wishing they would all go away.

Science fiction, Brian W. Aldiss once suggested, might be defined as a "search for a definition of man and his status in the universe." Considered as such, it would be appropriate for science fiction to abandon the notion that the economic activities of humanity represent some sort of primitive, atavistic behaviour, sure to be swept away by new scientific discoveries which will render such business obsolete. Instead, science fiction might embrace the realization that economics is in fact a basic element of human life, and likely to be a basic element in alien life; then, it might begin to explore strange new economies and boldly go where no economist has gone before. For people suffering through hard times, such dismal science fiction might prove surprisingly interesting.

Gary Westfahl

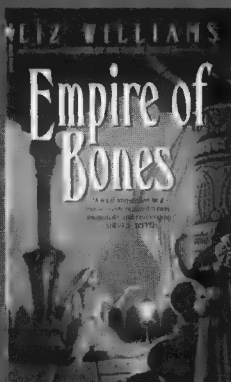
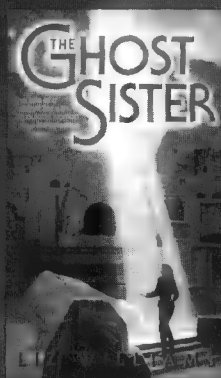
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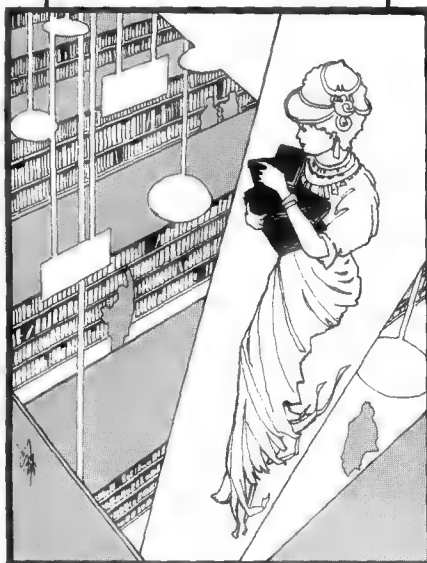
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Space Opera Buzz

William Thompson

There has been a fair amount of pre-publication press about Scott Westerfeld's latest novel, *The Risen Empire* (Tor, \$24.95) – “confirms the buzz that space opera is one of the most exciting branches of current sf” and similar laudatory prognostications. More often than not these sorts of claims prove false, driven by institutional review venues such as *Publishers Weekly* or *Booklist* whose ties to the trade are all too readily apparent. One need only think of the late proclaimed “epic fantasy of the year” *The Fifth Sorceress* or the *New York Times*’s eulogizing of *Across the Nightingale Floor*, both books which turned out to be average efforts and which had serious problems when it came to their incorporation of romantic and gender stereotypes, to recognize just how out-of-touch mainstream criticism can be when considering science fiction and fantasy. But happily I can report this is not the case here.

Westerfeld spins a dramatic tale that never flags in pace or imagination, nor in its abundance of original vision abandons narrative in favour of didactic digressions or two-page technical manuals about the components of some wondrous pump. While many sf fans revel in technological minutiae or narratively enervating instruction in scientific or social theory better addressed elsewhere as non-fiction, I am not among them, and I was pleased to find that Westerfeld had incorporated these elements by threading them indivisibly through what is a strong and vibrant story, as engaging and innovative in its scope as his mechanical inventions or cultural constructs. In my opinion this novel

represents a balance that much contemporary science fiction lacks. And just when you think that the author has exhausted the possibilities for further invention, he takes the reader down entirely new and delightfully unexpected paths, such as represented by the chapter “House.”

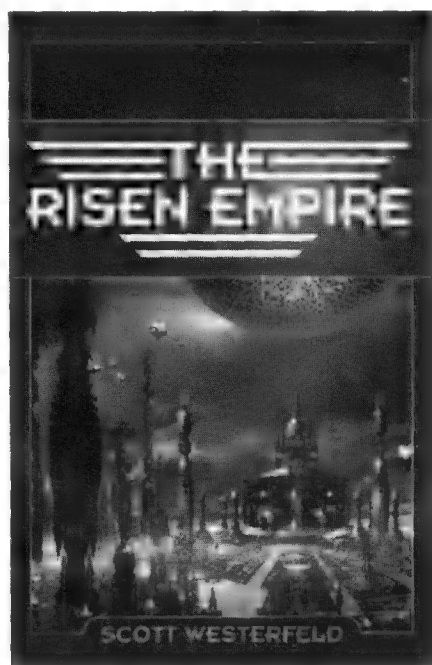
The title of the novel refers to the conquering of death and also to a human empire that has evolved approximately two-and-a-half millennia after our own. Comprising 80 worlds in a realm 30 light years across, the Risen Empire has been ruled for 1,600 years by a dead emperor whose power originates from his discovery of the means to cheat humankind’s “Old Enemy.” Supported by a cult of personality whose hope is

to become elevated among the ranks of the undead, and a military caste and political apparatus whose members come primarily from the emperor’s most loyal supporters, rule is secured through imperial control of the Lazarus symbiont that offers eternal life for those who serve the empire. This gift is bestowed only upon the fortunate and the few, but it has proven a powerful enough inducement to help secure the emperor’s long rule.

But this hegemony is being threatened by a quasi-religious sect of beings part human, part machine, the Rix. Their sole destiny is to seed the stars with Compound Minds, an artificial intelligence that has evolved naturally out of the primordial soup of animate computer networks. In a world in which all human life and endeavour is connected and dependent upon vast interrelated digital systems and mechanical intelligence, the Rix threaten to undermine and replace human dominance with a “higher power.” And they are fanatics in promoting their beliefs, using force and invasion to propagate their deity.

On the surface this premise appears to indicate just another melodrama opening in space. But the richness of imagination present in the author’s world-building, as well as the febrile and vivid description that accompanies his settings and the novel’s cultural and social infrastructure, easily set the book apart, not only from the common space opera but from most other science fiction as well. Westerfeld’s characterizations, despite a continually shifting perspective, possess both depth and a poignant and compassionate humanity. Varied and sharp subtexts exist throughout, ranging from political and social observations to speculations upon the nature and role of death in human evolution as well as our potential enslavement to the way we organize thought and information.

While I might be overstating comparisons, or my memory failing me (it’s been quite a while since I read *Foundation*), this recalls some of the best of Asimov but written with a more concise and breathless speed. It’s been quite a while since I’ve read science fiction I’ve enjoyed more or that combines narrative action with imagination as intelligently. Heartily recommended – and my only quibble with it is that it chooses to impose a hanging ending that interrupts the narrative midway through, seemingly an artificial obligation for the sequel. But as the author is keeping the series to two volumes, I guess we have comparatively little cause for complaint.





Conquistador (Roc, \$23.95) is the latest of S.M. Stirling's alternate histories, which include the author's homage to Kipling, Lamb and Mundy, *The Peshawar Lancers*, and the popular "Islander" series. Smartly written and conceived, Stirling once again uses contemporary figures displaced within an alternate reality as a frame from which to launch a more conventional tale of adventure. While one might wish that the author confronted more of the conceptual possibilities inherent in his conceit, one certainly can't fault him for the narrative quality of his storytelling.

Set within an imaginary realm where Columbus never reached the New World, *Conquistador* tells a tale of two Americas coexisting parallel to each other, in which a group of soldiers, following World War II, accidentally stumble upon a gateway in Oakland, California, connecting the two worlds. The alternate land they discover is North America as it would have possibly existed had Europeans never colonized the continent, and had the native population continued as hunter-gatherers. Elsewhere, in Europe and Asia, "Alexander did not die in 323 B.C.E., [and] the history of the world and its peoples turned down an entirely new track." The Alexandrian Empire dominates Old World history, from the Ganges to Iberia: Rome is but a footnote, and the mass migrations that poured into Europe during the early Middle Ages are instead deflected eastward into China and Manchuria. Northern Europe is a cultural backwater ruled by various Germanic tribes, and the rest of the old world is still medieval socially and in terms of technology. More importantly, perhaps, both Christianity and Islam never

occurred.

As the novel opens in 2009, the men who originally discovered the Gate in 1946 have since colonized the alternate California, first with former veterans and their families, later with people who for various reasons have found their own world no longer inviting. Ruled by an oligarchy of Thirty Families with their collaterals and affiliated settlers, they have established a commonwealth called New Virginia, based in the San Francisco Bay area, with outlying communities stretching from Alaska to Baja and colonies in Hawaii and Australasia. Trade is also active with Asia and, to varying degrees, contact or exploration has been conducted with the rest of world. The native population has suffered the same decimations of disease that occurred when Europeans arrived on the continent within our own history, and the few that are left have been largely pushed eastward, and the remainder justifiably hostile and relegated to the remoter regions of the commonwealth.

The Thirty Families have maintained access to their home world through the Gate, secretly setting up front businesses within our own world in order to selectively take advantage of our technology as well as exploit their economy. Needless to say, this gives them a distinct advantage in the new world they have adopted, though to maintain their sovereignty and society, its existence must be closely and ruthlessly guarded. Up until now their efforts have been successful, but the new world the Thirty Families have created is about to be threatened, both from within and without.

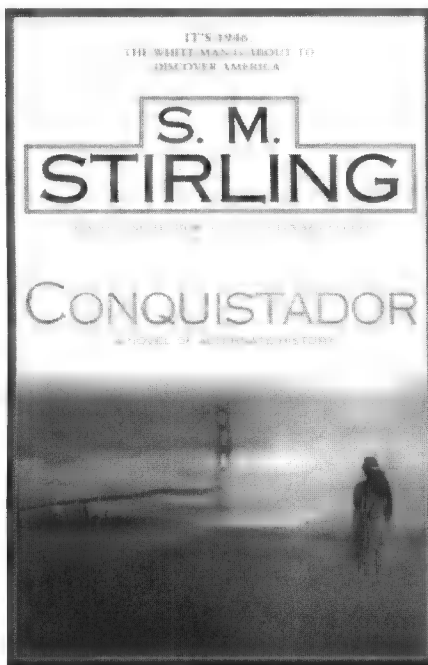
Stirling uses this premise to recreate the beauty of California, and by extension America, as it once existed, with rich and accurate detail. Underlying environmental themes run throughout, as do questions on the nature of "good" government. The author wisely refrains from embracing conceits of paradise while at the same time dangling the notion before the reader, nor does he attempt to politically mollify our destruction of Native American culture by concocting some fictional and falsely apologetic enlightenment. Instead, while much of the policies enacted by the Commonwealth can be viewed as benevolent, or as an alternative what-if, the author recognizes the darker currents of his characters' nature and incorporates them into an uneasy tension that exists throughout his fictional realm. Thus the narrative does not become some blithe excuse for utopian revision.

But despite touching upon these themes, this novel is essentially a conventional action drama with

paramilitary undertones, disguised within an imaginary setting. Stirling never fully addresses the issues he raises, any more than he provides an adequate rationale for the existence of the Gate or his dimensional realm, instead directing most of the novel's focus towards adventure, descriptive narrative and an evolving romance. This is not necessarily a complaint, as he does these things very well, and those seeking a well-written and engaging exploit will be pleased if not conceptually challenged.

The Book of Athyra (Ace, \$14) is the third in a series of reissues of Steven Brust's Vlad Taltos novels, comprising in their original texts *Athyra*, first published in 1993, and *Orca*, published in 1996. Along with two previous reissues, *The Book of Jhereg* and *The Book of Taltos*, collectively these trade paperbacks contain the first seven novels about Brust's eponymous hero, and it is gratifying to see all of his earlier work gathered together, and in a presentation offering some improvement over their original mass-market format. For those familiar with Brust's ongoing series, first started in 1983, it is only to be regretted that Berkley/Ace chose not to publish at least a portion of these collections in hardcover, as Tor rightfully began to do with Brust's more recent novels. As a natural descendent of Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar stories, it might be argued that Vlad deserved better.

The two novels offered here are among the author's best. Written with Brust's usual wit and wry intelligence, these stories emerge as some of his most masterful to date in terms of



composition. As usual adopting the guise of conventional fantasy but never conforming entirely to what is expected, in *Athyra* Brust continues the misadventures of his roguish antihero, but this time narrated through the experiences of a village boy whom Vlad encounters on the road. This allows the author to reexamine his central character from a fresh perspective, and outside the usual context of his haunts in Adrilankha, in certain ways mirroring the changes that have occurred in Vlad's life since last we saw him in *Phoenix*. The story cycle shifts to its new character, Savn, a rural teckla apprenticed as a "physicker." And accompanying this switch in perspective a parallel development takes place in the role of Vlad's familiars, with Rocza providing the jhereg experience. Both Vlad and Loiosh are withdrawn from centre stage, known only through their respective narrative counterparts.

Until meeting Vlad, Savn's life has been pretty much one contentment and routine: helping his Mae and Pae around the farm, playfully squabbling with his sister, Polyi, meeting his friends at Tem's, the town's only tavern, and afternoons spent learning his future profession under the exacting tutelage of Master Wag. His future seems promising and certain: marriage to one of the village girls (he has an eye on one) and a respected role within the community following his master's retirement. He's loved by his family and liked by friends and neighbours. As a young man barely in his 500th year, Savn has everything to look forward to with very little in the way of uncertainties. He's never travelled further than the next town, and outside the occasional traveller or minstrel, knows little of what goes on elsewhere in the Empire. And he is, after all, a teckla, known to be retiring and unassuming.

But then he meets Vlad: "Savn was the first one to see him, and, come to that, the first to see the Harbingers, as well. The Harbingers behaved as Harbingers do: they went unrecognized until after the fact." Perhaps had Savn realized "that Fate had sent an Omen" circling as two jhereg over his head, or had known of Vlad's reputation, he might have fled into hiding and thus avoided all the trouble that tends to follow in Vlad's wake. But innocent of Vlad's past, and tempted by promises of being taught some tricks of witchcraft, Savn soon discovers he's fallen in with the wrong crowd – if one Easterner and two jhereg can be numbered such – and bodies and mayhem begin to pile up. But by then Savn is already infatuated with the mysterious stranger, as well as no longer certain

that the future he once took for granted is as bright with prospect as he once thought it was. Of course, any future with Vlad involved is uncertain at best.

Brust begins this narrative with a vignette, a campsite gathering in which the reader remains unclear as to the participants, context or time in which the episode takes place. Almost entirely done through dialogue, and only about a page in length, the author adroitly sets up a series of questions that will have to await the narrative's conclusion for the reader to obtain any answers. And the story that follows reveals itself similarly, cleverly constructed to keep the audience waiting and wondering what will unfold next. Though a trademark of the author's style, it has perhaps never been as subtly or skilfully expressed, unless perhaps in the companion novel which follows.

In one of Brust's more overtly political novels, *Orca* directs a barbed look at contemporary business and government, and the corruption that in our own world was to later have so much import in the Enron and WorldCom scandals. Continuing to play with perspective, *Orca* is told as two stories told to another, at times only in part, and for at least one, secondhand. In addition, the person to whom the stories are told adds her own occasional commentary.

A year after events in *Athyra*, Vlad has arrived in the provincial coastal town of Northport, seeking aid for Savn (without wishing to give too much away, let us just say that in this novel the lad is mute in terms of any contribution to the narrative) from a local hedge witch. However, as payment she refuses any offer of money, and instead demands Vlad's help in preventing a bank foreclosure on her cottage. Due to certain problems of exposure, the outlawed assassin enlists the aid of an old friend, Kiera, the Empire's most notorious and well-connected thief. Together they will become involved in investigating a financial conspiracy that casts suspicion on most of the local community, as well as implicating at least two of the nobles Houses, and reaches the highest levels of government. And those responsible appear willing to do anything in order to keep their secrets, up to and including the murder of our hero.

Brust is in top form here, cleverly blending the best narrative devices of fantasy and detective story in a

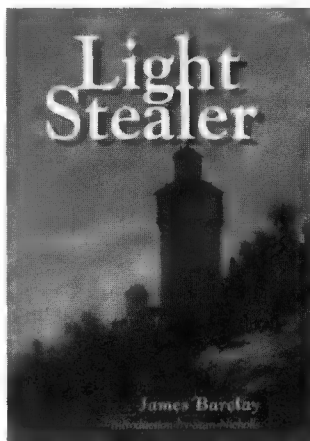
manner that is original and never gives the game away until the very end. The result is a wonderfully satiric look at government ineptitude in service to corporate greed that, for all its humour, packs a sharp punch when considered in the light of recent financial events, and, for the time it was written, could almost claim prescience were it not for the fact that similar schemes and corruption have been part of the landscape for quite some time. Though Brust has always used his novels to explore issues of genre, power and social responsibility, rarely has his focus been as keen or skilfully constructed as here, and when paired with his usual "snappy plotting and clever dialogue," he turns in a story that is a delight to read.

Finally, *Light Stealer* by James Barclay (PS Publishing, £10) offers essentially backfill for the author's popular and ongoing fantasy series "Legends of the Raven." Military adventure in the footsteps of Glen Cook's "Black Company" or David Gemmell's various sagas, Barclay's stories to date have, while following earlier conventions, exhibited greater consistency than the former and less dependence upon traditional tropes and settings than the latter, without losing any of the verve in telling found among either author's best. And of late Barclay has been increasingly incorporating themes that reflect more contemporary concerns and issues.

This novella tells the story of Septern and the creation of Dawnthief, which played such a prominent role in the author's first novel. It also represents PS Publishing's first foray into unadulterated action fantasy. Though fans of the series will certainly have an interest in adding this to their collection, I am uncertain how important or interesting it will prove to others. Only briefly touching upon what we have come to call weapons of mass destruction, the narrative is most likely to be informed through one's familiarity with Barclay's earlier work as well as his characterization of

what has become, in the author's fictional realm, a figure of historical interest. Outside this context, the novella offers only light adventure and mild entertainment. Further, reading was hampered by a relatively high proportion of typos, redundant words within sentences and one instance of character confusion. The resulting volume is neither the author nor the publisher's best.

William Thompson



Say the words “science fiction” and the first image that often flashes through the minds of the public is that of the spaceship. It’s an unsophisticated symbol, perhaps, and it distracts attention from the many sf stories of worthy sociological extrapolation, the Time Machines, the New Waves, the Cyberpunks, but – let’s face it – the concept of going Out There is an exciting mind-adventure that appeals to many a young sf virgin. Not for nothing was I known at school as “Spaceship” Brown.

Coyote: A Novel of Interstellar Exploration by Allen M. Steele (Ace, \$23.95) is a book that appears, at first glance, to be a straightforward tale of space adventure. First appearing as an irregular series of novelettes in *Asimov’s SF Magazine* (like Kage Baker’s *Black Projects*, *White Knights*, which I reviewed in *Interzone* 187), this novel featured in seven issues between January 2001 and December 2002 – apart from one tale first published in the anthology *Star Colonies* (DAW, 2000).

Steele has revised the majority of these stories, and (with the addition of various maps and diagrams) the resultant book is more than the sum of its previous parts. By its nature, therefore, *Coyote* consists of a narrative told in eight slices, rather than as a seamless whole. Despite being hampered by this format, Steele skilfully weaves the plot threads through the separate tales. The only hiccup is that some of the stories are written in the past tense, while others are in the present tense. This change in the author’s voice does jar somewhat.

Ostensibly, *Coyote* is about an interstellar trip to a distant star system, and the first efforts to establish a colony on Coyote, the habitable moon of one of the star system’s gas giants. We’ve been here many times before, but Steele keeps the interest up as, essentially, he uses a background of interstellar colonization to retell the American story of expansion and colonization of the United States’ first frontier, the Wild West. Although the novel is an in-your-face hard sf story (it begins with a delicious diagram of the starship *Alabama*) the theme of the book – that of liberty – is established right from the first scene of the first story.

We discover that the captain of the *Alabama*, Robert E. Lee, is leading a conspiracy to take over the starship on behalf of dissident citizens and, after smuggling fellow conspirator families on board, intends to found the colony on Coyote as a rebel settlement, free of tyranny. For this is the year 2070, and the starship has been built by the repressive American government that has arisen since the Second American

Back to Basics

Nigel Brown

Revolution. Just as the *Mayflower* crossed the Atlantic to seek a place where its pilgrims could lead their lives free of interference, so does the *Alabama* launch from Earth orbit on a journey of 47 light years to Coyote. The starship takes 232 years to make the journey, the crew travelling in suspended animation.

One of the most moving sections of the book occurs at this point: a study in isolation, when one of the crew, Leslie Gillis, is woken up prematurely. It reminded me of Larry Niven’s classic short story “The Ethics of Madness” (in *Neutron Star*, 1968). Steele cleverly uses the plight of Gillis to emphasize the vast distance that the *Alabama* is travelling, and underscores the isolation in space and time that the colonists are heading toward. This is hard sf at its best, a refreshing change from too many other sf novels where the opportunity to deal with the vast distances between stars – as an important

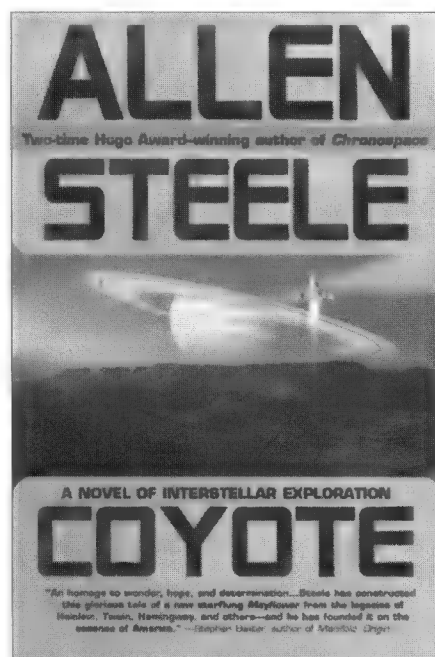
element in its own right – is thrown away. “Warp drive” is a convenient plot device, but it’s too easily used as a crutch to avoid the possible problems (and story possibilities) of interstellar travel.

Once our heroes get to Coyote (and we’re still only a quarter of the way through the book), Steele does a competent job in describing their first landing on the habitable moon, but, in keeping with the novel’s theme, he again chooses to concentrate on the subject of freedom from authority. After writing about the escape of these political dissidents from their country, the narrative switches to highlight individual struggles for liberty within the new colony. The viewpoint changes to that of Carlos Montero and Wendy Gunther, two teenagers, as they are forced to grow up within the unforgiving environment of their new world. One of the best sections of the book, titled “Across the Eastern Divide,” follows them as they set off to explore Coyote. There’s a special pleasure associated with following any kind of characters’ journey using a book’s map (as Tolkien readers would agree).

The influence of Robert A. Heinlein is palpable in *Coyote*. Heinlein replayed the American War of Independence many times in his fiction, most notably in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966) about a war of independence set on Earth’s moon. As in so much of Heinlein’s fiction, there’s a good deal about survival in a wilderness; once the colonists leave their hi-tech interstellar starship, they have to cope with a relatively primitive life on Coyote. The colonists become American frontiersmen, echoing the culture which they come from (and that of a mindset still strong in the contemporary American psyche: Steele is tapping into the US “survivalist” movement here). In this, however, he’s less successful at depicting the hardships than he might have been, thus squandering an opportunity to tell a more gripping tale. (Unlike Peter F. Hamilton who, in *The Reality Dysfunction* [1996], gives a superb recounting of the struggles in colonizing the planet Lalonde.)

On the other hand, Steele’s novel is a wonderful return to basics in more senses than the fate of the colonists: there’s always room for a big spaceship story, well told. And when the May 2003 *Asimov’s SF* dropped through my letterbox, I was delighted to see “Return to Coyote” on its cover. This novelette is a continuation of Steele’s novel, so I can report that we’ve got more of this work to look forward to.

Nigel Brown



BOOKS RECEIVED



MARCH 2003

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Abnett, Dan. **Riders of the Dead.** "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-264-4, 276pp, hardcover, cover by Adrian Smith, £16.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; "Far to the north of the Empire lies the dreaded Chaos Wastes...") *March 2003.*

Aldiss, Brian. **Super-State: A Novel of ■ Future Europe.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-211-6, 230pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; about "Europe forty years from now... a place where technology advances ever onwards, where humanitarian concerns slip ever backwards and where the answers to the big questions remain as elusive as they've always been," it was described by the *Guardian's* reviewer as "black, bitter and darkly unforgiving... classic Aldiss.") *3rd April 2003.*

Ash, Sarah. **Lord of Snow and Shadows: Book One of The Tears of Artamon.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04983-7, 484pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's first new novel

in several years, it's blurred as "richly imagined, full of intrigue and dark romance and boasting a cast of superbly drawn players... the first book in a thrilling new trilogy.") *1st May 2003.*

Asher, Neal. **The Skinner.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-48434-6, 583pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; a second fat sf adventure by the rising author of *Gridlinked* [2001].) *21st March 2003.*

Audley, Anselm. **Crusade: Book Three of The Aquasilva Trilogy.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6119-3, 449pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion of a trilogy [see below for the preceding volume] which, although set in a fantasy world, seems to be at least loosely based on the 13th-century Albigensian Crusade, a bloody affair which took place in the south of France.) *22nd April 2003.*

Audley, Anselm. **Inquisition: Book Two of The Aquasilva Trilogy.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-1502-7, 550pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; the second novel, following *Heresy* [2001], by a young, student-age British writer: "Anselm Audley is at St John's College, Oxford, reading Ancient and Modern History.") *22nd April 2003.*

Barclay, James. **Light Stealer.** Introduction by Stan Nicholls. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-61-7, 89pp, small-press trade paperback, cover artist unnamed, £8. (Fantasy novella, first edition; there is ■ simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £25; it's ■ signed edi-



tion, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; reviewed by William Thompson in this issue of *Interzone*.) *Dated "December 2002," but received in March 2003.*

Blaylock, James P. **Thirteen Phantasms and Other Stories.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-01014-8, xii+356pp, trade paperback, cover by Greg Spalenka, \$14. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 2000; this volume of 16 tales, his first proper collection, originally published by the small Edgewood Press, contains all the author's significant short fiction up to 2000, including the award-winning "Paper Dragons" [1986] and others which first appeared as independent chapbooks, and ranging to the comparatively recent title story, "Thirteen Phantasms" [1996], and "The Old Curiosity Shop" [1998]; two of the stories are collaborations with Tim Powers; most first appeared in original anthologies or in magazines such as *Asimov's*, *Omni* and *F&SF*; reviewed by Matt Colborn in *Interzone* 165.) *1st April 2003.*

Broderick, Damien. **Transcension.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30370-1, 348pp, trade paperback, cover by David Seeley, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; in which Australian writer Broderick "brings to life one of the high-tech futures he imagined in [his non-fiction book] *The Spike* [2001], ■ 22nd-century utopia pervaded by nano-technology and ruled by a benign but coldly objective AI"; Vernor Vinge's notion of the coming technological "Singularity" in human affairs seems to play a key part in Broderick's thinking.) *26th March 2003.*

Bunch, Chris. **Storm of Wings: Dragonmaster, Book One.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-192-6, 409pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2002; opener in a new trilogy by the Vietnam-veteran author who is an expert in "slam-bang excitement, lusty action and military magic" [in the words of his admirer Julian May]; *A Storm of Wings* is a title which has already been used for a modern fantasy novel, by M. John Harrison.) *April 2003.*

Burns, Cliff. **Righteous Blood: Two Novellas.** Introduction by Tim Lebbon. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-46-3, 177pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Richard Powers, £8. (Horror collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £25; it's ■ signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; Cliff Burns is ■ Canadian, and author of "six previous col-

lections and chapbooks.") Dated "December 2002," but received in March 2003.

Collins, Paul. **The Earthborn.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30307-8, 240pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Foster, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; Australian writer Collins's first book to be published in America, it seems to be an Aussie version of ■ Heinlein juvenile; states the blurb: "Welkin Quinn has always dreamed of setting foot on Earth. As an elite skyborn teenager aboard a transport ship, all he knows of his home planet is what he has learned from the Elders...") 9th April 2003.

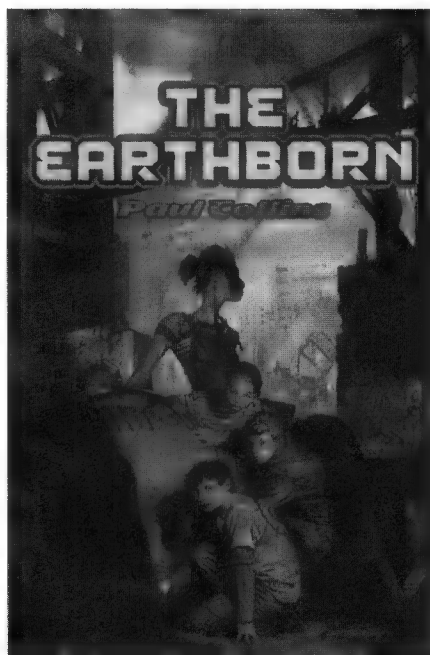
Cooper, Louise. **Rip Tide.** Foreword by Stephen Gallagher. Frontispiece by Fred Gambino. "Doctor Who Novellas." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-13-8, 155pp, hardcover, £25. (Sf/fantasy TV-series spinoff novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous standard edition [hardcover; not seen] priced at £10; the limited "deluxe edition" which the publishers have sent as a review copy is signed by author; illustrator and introducer; this is the sixth in a series of nicely-produced "Doctor Who" novellas from David J. Howe and Stephen James Walker's Telos imprint; for ordering information see their website: www.telos.co.uk.) Late entry: 27th February publication, received in March 2003.

Cutter, Leah R. **Paper Mage.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45917-2, 343pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, \$5.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by ■ new American writer; it's an example of the kind of fantasy usually known as "Chinoiserie" – tales drawing upon Chinese history, myth and legend; Cecelia Dart-Thornton, Terri Windling and others praise it.) March 2003.

De Larrabeiti, Michael. **The Borrible Trilogy.** Tor (UK), ISBN 0-330-49085-0, 726pp, B-format paperback, cover by Liz Pyle, £8.99. (Juvenile fantasy omnibus, first published in the UK, 2002; it contains the novels *The Borrhables* [1976], *The Borrhables Go for Broke* [1981] and *The Borrhables: Across the Dark Metropolis* [1986] – which ■ *Times Educational Supplement* reviewer once described ■ "Battersea's answer to *Watership Down*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Guns of Navarone*.") 18th April 2003.

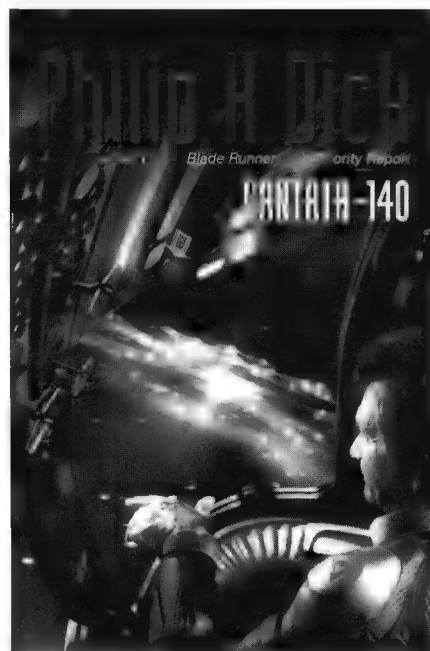
Denning, Troy. **Tatooine Ghost.** "Star Wars." Century/Lucas Books, ISBN 1-8441-3207-2, 403pp, hardcover, cover by Steven D. Anderson, £16.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2003; another chapter in the unending multi-authored space opera conceived by George Lucas, in which "Han Solo and Leia Organa take centre stage...") 6th March 2003.

Dick, Philip K. **Cantata-140.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07459-0, 188pp, B-format



paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA as *The Crack in Space*, 1966; one of Dick's more minor efforts, with its original magazine title restored [however, it's a bit naughty of the publishers not to mention the book's former title]; note: unlike the following novel, this is not presented as one of the "SF Masterworks" series.) 13th March 2003.

Dick, Philip K. **The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch.** "SF Masterworks, 52." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07480-9, 230pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1964; both satirical and weird – one of the finest examples of Dick's mind-bending power, from the period of his creative peak.) 13th March 2003.



Erskine, Barbara. **Hiding from the Light.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651208-9, 719pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 2002; perhaps better described as a "supernatural romance" than ■ horror yarn, this is an Essex-set tale involving the ghost of the notorious real-life "witchfinder general" Matthew Hopkins; it's by the popular British author of such fantasy-tinged bestsellers ■ *Lady of Hay* ["which has sold well over a million copies worldwide"], *Midnight is a Lonely Place*, *House of Echoes*, *On the Edge of Darkness*, and *Whispers in the Sand*.) 7th April 2003.

Feist, Raymond E. **Talon of the Silver Hawk: Conclave of Shadows, Book One.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-716082-8, 390pp, C-format paperback, cover by Martin McKenna, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK [?], 2002; the opening of "a powerful new epic fantasy series from one of the great masters of the genre"; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 184.) 7th April 2003.

Gemmell, David A. **The Legend of Deathwalker.** "A Novel of Druss the Legend." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-15081-9, 413pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1996; this is the eighth Corgi printing, so Gemmell evidently continues to sell well; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 108.) 10th April 2003.

Gemmell, David A. **Stormrider.** "A Novel of the Rigante." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14676-5, 601pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; last in the tetralogy begun by *Sword in the Storm* [1998], *Midnight Falcon* [1999] and *Ravenheart* [2001].) 10th April 2003.

Gemmell, David A. **White Wolf.** "A Novel of Druss the Legend." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04444-4, 428pp, hardcover, cover by John Bolton, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's blurbed as "the start of a gripping new series in the tradition of the Drenai Tales... introducing a compelling hero, Skilgannon the Damned.") 10th April 2003.

Gentle, Mary. **White Crow.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07519-8, x+848pp, B-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £9.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *Rats and Gargoyles* [1990], *The Architecture of Desire* [1991] and *Left to His Own Devices* [1994], and three linked short stories – "Beggars in Satin," "The Knot Garden" and "Black Motley"; there is also a new six-page foreword by the author, dated 2002, in which she argues that the series is science fiction rather than fantasy – despite

which, the publishers clearly state "FANTASY" on the back cover.) 10th April 2003.

Herbert, Brian, and Kevin J. Anderson.

The Butlerian Jihad: Legends of

Dune, I. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-82332-1, viii+616pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 2002; another prequel to the late Frank Herbert's bestselling *Dune* [1965], following the now-completed "Prelude to *Dune*" trilogy by the original author's son, Brian Herbert, and his prolific jack-of-all-trades collaborator Kevin J. Anderson; this is the first in yet another trilogy: no end is in sight.) 28th April 2003.

Herbert, Frank. **Children of Dune**. "The third DUNE novel." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07490-6, 426pp, A-format paperback, cover by Robert Nicholls, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1976; it looks as though Orion/Gollancz have now clawed back the paperback rights to these old Herbert bestsellers from New English Library – which was their mass-market home for many a long year.) 13th March 2003.

Herbert, Frank. **God Emperor of Dune**. "The fourth DUNE novel." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07506-6, 426pp, A-format paperback, cover by Robert Nicholls, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1981; some readers think the original "Dune" series should have stopped at the conclusion of this novel...) 13th March 2003.

Herter, David. **Evening's Empire**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30297-7, 352pp, trade paperback, cover by Shelley Eshkar, \$15.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; a second book by Herter, author of the sf novel *Ceres Storm* [2000]; the blurb compares it to Gene Wolfe's *Peace*.) 11th April 2003.

Horsley, Jake. **Matrix Warrior: Being the One. The Unofficial Handbook**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07527-9, 232pp, hardcover, £6.99. (Pop-philosophical, religio-conspiratorial treatise, first edition; by ■ British author [born circa 1970] best known as a film critic, it's ■ curious spinoff from the cyberpunkish sf movie *The Matrix* [1999], no doubt timed to cash in on the forthcoming sequel to that film; serious Philip K. Dick fans may want to check it out, since he seems to be mentioned more often than anyone else – although ■ number of the usual suspects are at least name-checked: William Blake, William S. Burroughs, Carlos Castaneda, Jean Baudrillard, etc; the blurb describes the book as "a field manual providing all the instruction necessary for self-unplugging. It is AI disapproved, unauthorized by the Gatekeepers. Ignore it

at your peril!") [but note the exact publication date!].) 1st April 2003.

Jakubowski, Maxim, and M. Christian, eds.

The Mammoth Book of Future Cops.

Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-502-2, xii+498pp, B-format paperback, cover by Joe Roberts, £6.99. (Sf/crime anthology, first edition; it contains ■ mix of new and reprinted stories, all in one way or another to do with "future cops," by Chris Amies, Stephen Baxter, Mat Coward, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Philip K. Dick [an extract from his novel *A Scanner Darkly*], Paul Di Filippo, Joe Haldeman, Paul McAuley, China Miéville, William F. Nolan, Mike Resnick, Richard Paul Russo, John Shirley, Cecilia Tan, Ian Watson, Conrad Williams and others; three stories are reprinted from *Interzone* – Molly Brown's "No Better Than Anyone Else" [1993], Keith Brooke's "Professionals" [1994] and Stephen Dedman's "Ravens" [2001].) 27th March 2003.

Kress, Nancy, ed. **Nebula Awards Showcase 2003**. "The Year's Best SF and Fantasy, chosen by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America." Roc, ISBN 0-451-45909-1, 230pp, trade paperback, cover by Ray Lundgren, \$14.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains reprinted stories, all first published in 2001, by Catherine Asaro, James Patrick Kelly, Kelly Link, Severna Park, Mike Resnick and Jack Williamson, plus poems by Bruce Boston and Joe Haldeman, and a considerable amount of non-fiction commentary on the field, by Terry Bisson, Michael Cassutt, Ellen Datlow, Geoffrey A. Landis, Harry Turtledove and others.) April 2003.

Laymon, Richard. **Amara**. Introduction by Dean Koontz. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-6932-7, x+341pp, hardcover, cover by Steve

Crisp, £18.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; this is probably the last novel from Laymon, who died in February 2001, in his early 50s; it's a resurrected-Egyptian-mummy tale.) 30th April 2003.

Le Guin, Ursula. **The Other Wind**.

Orion, ISBN 1-84255-211-2, 246pp, B-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £5.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the latest full-length tale in the author's highly-praised Earthsea cycle, it won the 2002 World Fantasy Award for best novel – although the Orion Children's Books people seem to be unaware of that.) 3rd April 2003.

McNeill, Graham. **Warriors of Ultramar**.

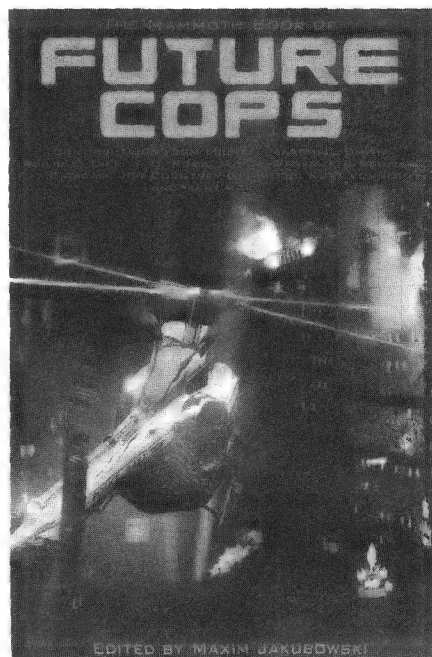
"Warhammer 40000. An Ultramarines Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library 1-84416-000-9, 317pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alex Boyd, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition.) March 2003.

Malzberg, Barry N., ed. **The Best Time Travel Stories of All Time**. ibooks, ISBN 0-7434-5814-1, viii+440pp, trade paperback, cover by Ralf Heimlich, £10.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 2002; this is the American first edition with ■ British price and publication date specified; it contains all-reprint [and mostly very familiar] stories in a time-paradoxical vein by Poul Anderson, Fredric Brown, Jack M. Dann, Philip K. Dick, Charles L. Harness, Damon Knight, Nancy Kress, Geoffrey A. Landis, Jack McDavitt, Robert Silverberg, William Tenn, James Tiptree, Jr. and others; it also contains a "full-color graphic adaptation" of Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder"; solid stuff for readers new to the field; see the publishers' website, www.ibooksinc.com, for further details.) March 2003.

Marshall, Michael. **The Straw Men**.

"Friends. Neighbours. Serial killers." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-649998-8, 484pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the UK, 2002; this is ■ new byline for Michael Marshall Smith, who has been rebranded – probably, in the main, for the American market, to avoid confusion with Martin Cruz Smith and other like-named people; it's his fourth novel, but the first under this form of his name; reviewed, at length, by Matt Hills in *Interzone* 182.) 7th April 2003.

Miéville, China. **The Scar**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-39290-5, 795pp, A-format paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £7.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; the author's third novel, following *King Rat* [1998] and the widely-praised *Perdido Street Station* [2000], it's about a "search for the island of ■ forgotten people, for the most astonishing beast in the seas, and ultimately



for a fabled place – a massive wound in reality, a source of unthinkable power and danger”; it was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and Michael Moorcock praised it as “a massive, sprawling, inventive Hobbesian fantasy.”) 10th April 2003.

Moorcock, Michael. **The History of the Runestaff**. “Fantasy Masterworks, 36.” Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07469-8, 646pp, B-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £7.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in the UK in more-or-less this form, 1979; it contains the novels *The Jewel in the Skull* [1967], *The Mad God's Amulet* [1968], *The Sword of the Dawn* [1968] and *The Runestaff* [1969], about the adventures of Dorian Hawkmoon in the far-future Dark Empire of Granbretan; here, they follow the revised text of the Orion/Millennium hardcover edition of 1992 which was entitled simply *Hawkmoon* and subtitled on the cover “The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 3.”) 10th April 2003.

Morgan, Richard. **Broken Angels**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07324-1, 394pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £17.99; Morgan's second novel, following the highly-praised *Altered Carbon* [2002], it features the same hero as the earlier novel, although it's set 50 years on – in the 26th century.) 20th March 2003.

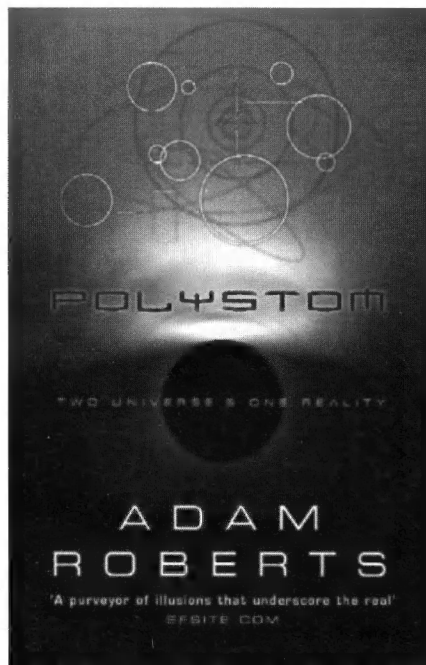
Nagata, Linda. **Memory**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87721-8, 416pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this Hawaii-based scientist-author's sixth novel, and her second for Tor Books, it's described as “an sf tour de force of technology indistinguishable from magic.”) May 2003.

O'Leary, Patrick. **The Impossible Bird**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30339-6, 365pp, trade paperback, cover by Gregory Manchess, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; O'Leary's third novel, it was well received by the critics in America; John Clute wrote of it in *The New York Review of SF*: “Philip K. Dick texture... cool de Chirico surreality... some of the estranged crystalline ring of Jonathan Carroll or Jonathan Lethem or Robert Charles Wilson... In the end *The Impossible Bird* does moult out of its sf trappings and lifts our hearts.”) 12th March 2003.

Parker, K. J. **Memory: The Scavenger Trilogy, Book Three**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-171-3, 572pp, C-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it follows *Shadow* [2001] and *Pattern* [2002].) 3rd April 2003.

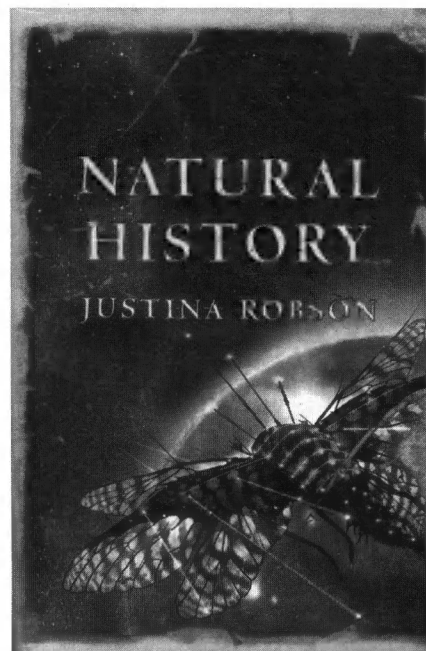
Pratchett, Terry, and Stephen Briggs. **The New Discworld Companion**. “The Fully

May/June 2003



Revised and Updated Reference Book to all things Discworldian.” Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07487-1, 280pp, C-format paperback, cover by Paul Kidby, £12.99. (Illustrated, alphabetical who's who and what's what of Terry Pratchett's 20-years-a-growing humorous fantasy series; first edition in this form; it's a considerable expansion of the same authors' original book, *The Discworld Companion*, first published in 1994, and looks to be equally invaluable to Pratchett fans.) 27th March 2003.

Rennie, Gordon. **Shadow Point**. “Warhammer 40000.” Games Workshop/Black Library 1-84154-263-6, 287pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Dainton, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition.) March 2003.



Rickman, Phil. **The Lamp of the Wicked**. “A Merrily Watkins Mystery.” Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90805-8, 552pp, hardcover, £10. (Horror/crime novel, first edition; fifth in the “spiritual procedural” series about a female exorcist called the Reverend Merrily Watkins, following *The Wine of Angels* [1998], *Midwinter of the Spirit* [1999], *A Crown of Lights* [2000] and *The Cure of Souls* [2001].) 4th April 2003.

Roberts, Adam. **Polystom**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07178-8, 294pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen] priced at £9.99; it's blurbed as the author's “most ambitious novel to date”; this is the fourth novel by Roberts, following *Salt* [2000], *On* [2002] and *Stone* [2002]; we're not fans of his titling policy, but at least this new one has a three-syllable one-word title, which should be enough in itself to make this its most memorable novel to date.) May 2003.

Robson, Justina. **Natural History**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90745-0, 330pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen] priced at £10.99; Robson's third novel, it concerns space travel, alien encounters, and future evolution – in short, it sounds like the most solid of solid sf, which perhaps justifies the publicist's comment in the accompanying press release: “She is rare, being among only a handful of women writing SF” – in British terms, at least, that may not be too much of an exaggeration.) 18th April 2003.

Russell, Gary. **The Art of The Two Towers**. “The Lord of the Rings.” HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-713564-5, 192pp, large-format hardcover, £25. (Fantasy movie art portfolio, first edition; it contains “600 exclusive paintings, sketches and [works of] digital art from the spectacular film” – i.e., from Peter Jackson's movie based on J. R. R. Tolkien's novel; there is an afterword by Gollum-actor Andy Serkis.) 17th March 2003.

Russell, Sean. **The Isle of Battle: Book Two of The Swans' War**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-193-4, 562pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; by a Canadian writer [born 1952], it follows *The One Kingdom* [2000].) April 2003.

Salvatore, R. A. **Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones**. Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-941057-5, 344pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steven D. Anderson, £6.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 2002; it's “based on the story by George Lucas and the screenplay by George Lucas and Jonathan Hales.”) 3rd April 2003.

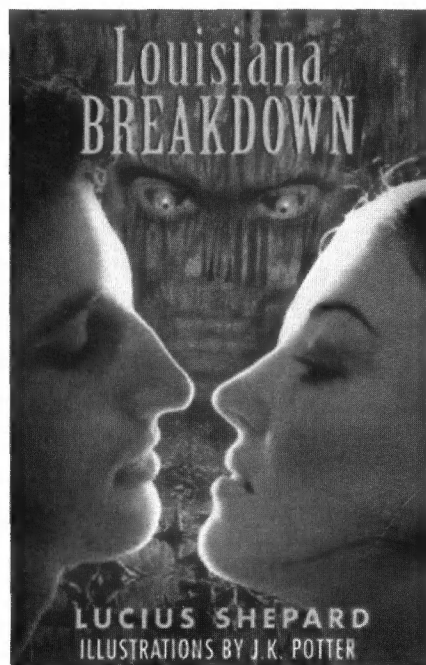
Shepard, Lucius. **Louisiana Breakdown.** Illustrated by J. K. Potter. Foreword by Poppy Z. Brite. Afterword by Potter. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-14-2, xi+145pp, hardcover, cover by Potter, \$21.95. (Horror/fantasy novella, first edition; a nicely-packaged new short novel by the eccentric but stylish Shepard, this will no doubt become a collector's item; to order, see the publishers' website: www.goldengryphon.com; this is Golden Gryphon's 23rd title; reviewed, from an advance proof, by William Thompson in *Interzone* 188.) April 2003.

Silver, Steven H., and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **Horrible Beginnings.** "The stories that launched the careers..." DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0123-2, 316pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; follow-up to the previous two months' DAW Books outings, *Wondrous Beginnings* [sf tales] and *Magical Beginnings* [fantasy tales], it contains 17 reprint stories, all of which are ostensibly their authors' first published works in the genre; contributors, arranged in chronological order of first appearance, include Robert Bloch, Henry Kuttner, Ramsey Campbell, Tanith Lee, Edward Bryant, F. Paul Wilson, Thomas F. Monteleone, Neil Gaiman, Yvonne Navarro, Poppy Z. Brite, Elizabeth Hand, Kathe Koja, P. N. Elrod and others; one story, Kim Newman's "Dreamers" [1984], is reprinted from *Interzone*; the stories contain newly-written introductions by the still-living authors, which give some added value to the book.) March 2003.

Silverberg, Robert. **Son of Man.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07501-5, 192pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1971; one of Silverberg's best, about a man who travels to the far, far future and discovers an Earth where the inhabitants "have never heard of Homer, or Galileo, or Mozart, or Darwin, or Shakespeare, or Einstein"; it seems more poignant, and more pertinent, all the time.) 20th March 2003.

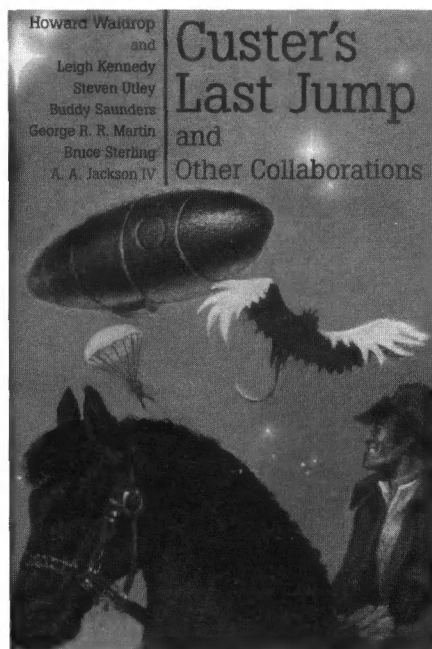
Tepper, Sheri S. **The Visitor.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07447-7, 407pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; it's set on an Earth, many centuries hence, devastated by an asteroid impact.) 10th April 2003.

Topping, Keith. **A Day in the Life: The Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to 24.** Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-53-7, 184pp, trade paperback, cover by Dariusz Jasiczak, £9.99. (Unillustrated guide to the TV thriller series 24, created by Joel



Surnow and Robert Cochran, and starring Kiefer Sutherland; first edition; for ordering information see the publishers' website: www.telos.co.uk; the book is attractively produced, and no doubt will be of interest to anyone beguiled by the TV series itself.) 20th March 2003.

Vance, Jack. **The Blue World.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07348-9, 190pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1966; one of Vance's more memorable efforts, set on a planet which is all ocean apart from some seaweed-type islands, and where the crash-landed human colonists become prey to "the kragens - huge squid-like creatures.") 20th March 2003.



Varley, John. **Red Thunder.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-01015-6, 411pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Warner, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; Varley's first new novel since *The Golden Globe*, it seems to be a rather traditional, Heinlein-esque, "can-do" yarn about a free-lance expedition to Mars.) 1st April 2003.

Waldrop, Howard, with others. **Custer's Last Jump and Other Collaborations.** Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-13-4, x+254pp, hardcover, cover by Frank Kelly Freas, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains eight stories, together with intros and afterwords and other commentary, by Howard Waldrop writing in collaboration with A. A. Jackson IV, Leigh Kennedy, George R. R. Martin, Buddy Saunders, Bruce Sterling and Steven Utley; three of them, including two of novella length, "Custer's Last Jump!" and "Black as the Pit, from Pole to Pole," are collaborations with the last-named, Utley; to order, see the publishers' website: www.goldengryphon.com; this is another good-looking, well-produced volume of fantastic fiction from Golden Gryphon, their 24th title.) April 2003.

Walters, Nick. **Reckless Engineering.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-48603-1, 270pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, it's set mainly in Bristol in the 19th century and involves Isambard Kingdom Brunel.) 7th April 2003.

Wooding, Chris. **Poison.** Scholastic Press, ISBN 0-439-98162-X, 269pp, hardcover, cover by Tim Edmonds, £12.99. (Juvenile horror/fantasy novel, first edition; this is the prolific 25-year-old Chris Wooding's second hardcover, following his award-winning *The Haunting of Alazabel Cray* [2001] and many kids' paperback-originals written since he was 19; "Poison" is the heroine's name, and the book is blurbed as "a gripping and malevolent tale from a master storyteller.") 21st March 2003.

Wooding, Chris. **The Weavers of Saramyr.** "Book One of *The Braided Path*." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07441-8, 375pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen] priced at £10.99; Wooding's first novel intended for adults, it's described as "a richly textured, darkly evocative fantasy set in a beautifully realized world... with an enticing oriental flavour.") 15th May 2003.

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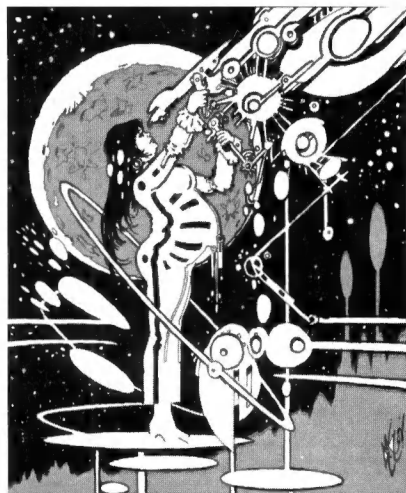
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